



Race and Vine:
Three Narratives Set in Philadelphia

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Cover image by Mary Evelyn Harju
The Fall, 2008
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I. Trish: *A Romance*

I.

The story starts here: PAFA
has its yearly opening, and I
explore it with Lisa. I am
looking for Trish's paintings:
she has invited me. She is no
where in sight. There: it's her
self-portrait on the wall, called
The Vessel. Sepia, brown, colors
that have Spanish resonance.
Trish's in blue, half-profiled,
wearing an expression of pensive
angst. She stares at me from
the painting, pensively apart,
peremptory. Suddenly, & under my skin.

Our first date: Lisa still
in the dark. An operation I
enact covertly. We are going
to see a movie: *Amelie*. She is
merely cute. I sit through this
for you, Trish. I dialogue with
Bukowski while I sit there: *I
deserve a blowjob for this*. Hank
is amused but reticent. Trish
wears a green winter hat which
now sits on her lap. Her hair
is pony-tailed. She has had a
salad at Cosi. I am hungry, I
enjoy my hunger: suffered for her.

Back at my place: 21st and Race.
I play Trish Sweet and Dandy
from *The Harder They Come*. She
dances without restraint on the
tan carpeted floor. Something is
becoming loose in us. Then she
lays down on my floor, in blue as
in *The Vessel*, and lets me paw at
her. Skyrocketing giddiness over
takes us. We are drinking grog
(rum and water) from capacious
blue mugs, each other's new toy.
Look: I have, in my pocket, a
fire-red copy of Aleister Crowley. *Do what thou wilt*.

I am in an artist's studio: winter,
long broad windows, sunset, it's
going down. I am in a wife-beater
with braces, mustachioed, jack-in-
the-box. There is a portrait of
Apollo on the wall: nude, in a
field of purples and blues. He
carries a fiddle. Trish and I are
drinking cheap red wine. There
is no one else (it seems) in the
building. Pipes drone steadily.
Warmed by the wine, we sneak
into a dark bathroom. I crash
through several floors of myself.

Pull-out couch: we are down for
the count. I have my hands on her
sex. She is shushing me. I make no
noise. There is no sleep here. The
windows represent being into a
new space. Morning: we will walk
back to my 'hood. We will eat at
my diner. I will feel, on Cherry
Street, that I have never flown
this fast around the universe. I
will be all the worse for being
happy (Lisa). Pancakes do
not taste as they ever have
before: ambrosial, tokens of flames.

Phone message: "the first kiss
of love." Now I cannot avoid
telling Lisa. She takes it on
the face but not without a fight.
Word has spread around the store.
I wake up to find myself a book-
store Byron. Trish wavers. She
aims to please everyone. She says
she doesn't know. Then, there is
another *arriviste*. He is
older. He dives headfirst into
paint, but without painting. I
have no defense against this
first onslaught, I hold tight, lost.

II.

First night at my place: I
am able to have Trish to
look at up close. I notice
how different she is from
Lisa: long, lean torso,
tiny breasts, narrow waist,
flaxen straight hair that
reaches down her back.
She loves me wildly and
with feeling. "Hair upon the
pillow like a sleepy golden
storm," Trish slept late. Yet
she was out as soon as she
was in; "I'm with Roger again,"

she said, and pulled the plug. There
was a period in which we could
not talk to each other. I either
had to have her totally or not
at all. There would be no grey
for us. Was this karma for the
manner in which I treated
Lisa? Closing shift: Roger came
to pick up Trish. I heaved against
the glass doors before the manager
came to let us out. Romantic poems
were being written, informed by a
kind of desperation. I read Donne
for a Penn class and extrapolated

his stance (metaphysics abridging
Romanticism) and remembered
that first night, in which Trish
and I read *The Ecstasy* to each
other. Now, she hoarded her body
where I could not see. *I have my
own concerns*, I thought to myself,
walking home from Bennett Hall in rain.
Spring rains; Trish returns. She
seems chastened. There is a part
of her that needs me. It is a part
of her that she rebels against, so
that her manner towards me takes
the form of an interior war made

exterior. My folks take us to the
Pink Rose bakery on Bainbridge
Street, and Trish and I share a
big brownie. We explore the Eyes
Gallery on South Street and my
folks learn Trish's eye, tastes.
'There is a loaded sky bearing
down on us: Trish's eyes water.
We are to spend the night at Trish's
place. She lives with a handful of
artists at 4325 Baltimore Ave.
James, there, is bi-polar, always causing
problems. Trish is turned on by him
but pretends not to be. Her room is

uncarpeted, wooden slat floors, big
wooden dresser, overlooking a quaint
West Philly courtyard. There is a cat
named Zooska, a preternaturally
intelligent girl-cat that plays with us.
For some reason we do not make
love that night, and when I wake up
I am fit to burst. I send red signals.
Trish's compassion overtakes her: I
loosen, getting sucked off. Her glasses
remain on. She is doing this because
she loves me, and love-waves are
communicated in oral gestures. She
means it. I can sense James

in the courtyard, listening. Will Trish
close around me at the right moment,
or will she miss? As I go off the edge,
I feel her miss slightly and then hit,
and I have left the planet. She is so
far beneath me that there is no seeing
her. She swallows me, and I will never
leave her mouth again. It is sealed.

III.

It happened again: Trish found someone to replace me with.

She broke the news over the phone. I betrayed no emotion.

Why was this happening? I felt I had already repaid my karmic debt of suffering to Lisa: this was overtime.

This dude was a concierge at a fancy hotel: “Byronic,” Trish said (the first Byronic concierge ever, I thought). Trish insisted on telling me the story, and it was sordid, drunken, dumb.

They met through a mutual friend at a bar. This concierge made a blatant play for her and she accepted it. They stumbled drunkenly to his apartment and slept together. At that point they made a pact not to sleep with anyone else for the time being. They were saving each other from what they were already doing. I found the whole thing incoherent and lame: why did Trish need to be “saved” from me? Why was this guy so eager to make a pact?

Silent mode: I had Trish like a disease, but it helped not to talk to her. I needed to be cured of her just like she did of me. One day I had an appointment in Manayunk, and I met a woman on the R6 train. She was a tall brunette, medium build, with black eyes and freckles. I was wearing my Shelley shirt (“I am as wayward as Shelley”) and that started the ball rolling. She was lively, easy to talk to. We made a date to meet soon after.

Franklin Institute steps: there she sat, in a long sleeveless dress that was tie-dyed, and had earth-tones of “hippie” all over it. We are at my apartment. Her legs fall into my lap. We are naked. We feed on each other in the summer heat, as the sun goes down. That’s it, past this: I am cured. I can go after Trish again because I do not need to. I can want Trish again because I do not want her too much. Flesh equals flesh. Somehow Trish is open: we make plans to see a movie. I do not ask

about the concierge: she offers no information. When she arrives at my pad (I help her out of a red cab) she is either drunk or stoned, or both. She is in a frilly white skirt, hair bunned, languid, droopy eyelids. My body reacts: now is the time I must claim her. She must be taken. I touch her in a hesitant way and she pulls me on top of her (living room floor, lights on, sun setting, skirt hitched, shirts on, tan carpet). For once: I worry not about pleasing her. I need to place myself in her as

quickly as possible, release. I do so with a huge sense of triumph. She is my animal bride and we have just been married. She tells me she is cheating on the concierge, but there is no remorse in her voice. It is the voice of one possessed. Interposition will not happen again. The only flesh that need be equaled is mine to hers. So: the marriage begins. Yet I live in fear: at any moment the rug can be pulled from beneath me. Am I replaceable?

IV.

How we establish ourselves: every night is spent together. I prefer to spend as many nights as possible in West Philly, where rugged old houses sport ample foliage that is ripe with the flush of late August. We make love at least once a night, so we can be fully animal and happily married. Green herb follows us around as a mode of relaxation and to get our moods in sync. Trish is developing my palette: I taste pesto for the first time, vegetarian stews.

At 4325, there is a party all the time, and it is like finding an adolescence that I never had. Jackie was another painter who lived on the ground floor (Trish's room was upstairs.) Trish and Jackie had fooled around and Jackie painted in a far more violent manner than Trish (lots of smears, grays, blacks, more abstraction), but he was a farm kid from Carolina and a gentle soul. His girlfriend Grace was from a well-connected Connecticut family and knew J.D. Salinger personally. She had a bit of an attitude, and her lips were often curled in a sneer.

The rest of the 4325 crew were rock and rollers and into doing Ritalin lines. By October I am an honorary member of the household. At that time I was recording an album of spoken-word stuff in South Philly. I would zoom on a trolley up to West Philly and that night there was a party. The kitchen had awful yellow wallpaper and a blazingly bright light and I did shots there with Jackie. I wasn't a big drinker but that night Trish both went to town, and got rowdy.

Trish and I adjourn to her bedroom
and have loud, drunken sex with the
door wide open. Her diaphragm got
stuck but we just kept going. Later
we heard another couple hooking
up down the hall. The air was mild
and clean and it was warm for October
and there was no way we could go to
bed. We staggered down to the front
porch and sat on the forest-green
swing-bench that was held up
against Jackie's window. Branches
hung between us and the street.
Leaves were falling in Clark Park.

That night was one peak of 4325.
There were many. We began to
develop our rituals beyond just
pot, food, and sex. I always
cherished the walk from Penn
(where I was finishing my
degree) to 4325. At 40th and
Spruce was the University
Pinball Arcade, which I liked
to call the Universal Pinball
Arcade, but neither of us ever
went in. We also liked to walk
late up to Fresh Grocer at
40th and Walnut. We'd buy

French bread, because on pot
there is nothing better. We were
also spending lots of time with
Tobi, who at that point was
Trish's best friend. She was
another painter, less into
mythology and more into
precisely detailed figuration.
Tobi was tiny, with exquisite
cheekbones, bright blue eyes,
wavy chestnut hair, thick bow-
shaped lips. She was hilarious
but turbulent, and wont to cause
scenes. There were to be lots. I loved her too.

One night Trish and Tobi came with me to the studio in South Philly where I was recording. We drank Paisano (cheap red wine) and listened to the recordings. Tobi wanted us to walk her home, but she was on her bike and it was completely out of our way. She was drunk and upset and started yelling and abruptly left. Trish and Tobi tended to mirror each other and so I wasn't surprised that Trish also started to freak out.

Trish ran into moving traffic on 18th and Walnut (right by B & N where we worked), and I had to drag her back to the sidewalk. Then she attempted to strangle me when we had almost reached my pad on 21st Street. I managed to tear her off, but it was my first inkling that being Trish's established husband could be onerous. For the first time that night, I went to bed tired in a bad way. This wouldn't be all roses. Reds, with blues.

V.

Still: fertilized, loved, I began
to write deeply again. Yet
I remembered what came
to seem like a curse: the
fear that I would not be
heard. Was I in the wrong
place at the wrong time?
So I spiraled into depression,
even as pieces tumbled out.

Midnight Blues, a dirge
in odal form, was the best,
written during witching
hour, snow coming down,
Trish dead asleep in bed.

At one point I even began
to consider suicide: I had
given so much time to my
art, why was I being
held back? How could I
live under a confining
curse? Trish is my lover
but not very good at
comforting me: she is too
lost in her own blues. Too
many colors swirl around
her head, she is lost to
images, tints, hues, shades.
Wood creaks beneath us.

By X-Mas our mood lifts.
My folks take us to dinner
in a Vietnamese restaurant,
and we order pad thai for
the first time. Trish for me
means new tastes and the
color of these noodles is
matched to her hair that
is grown out, no longer
bunned. We are near
home in West Philly
and West Philly does
begin to feel like home.
No sharp pangs linger, our bodies shared.

New Years there's a party:
Tobi giggles over Indian
food that we have delivered,
everything is voluptuous
luxury. I jam with Matt from
Eris in the music room (Josh's
bedroom) on Velvets tunes,
read the new pieces for Jackie
who says "groovy." Trish is a
bright fish swimming in a
school, green waters around
us. We are two fish together
and we are ripped to the gills
and the floor is soft coral.

Trish is unhappy: parties are
starting to wear on her. By
February she moves into a
new pad in a rugged old
brown brick building, also
in West Philly, with Tobi.
The doors to Trish's bed-
room are glass, not very
substantial, so Tobi has to
listen to us make love all
the time (a night with no
love would be unworthy
of us). I love the view from
Trish's windows: placid

looking 42nd Street, trees,
large houses, it could pass
for suburbia. It reminded
me, also, of the England I
have always imagined, the
ideal England which gave
rise to so many early heroes
of mine, and which once
produced giants of the written
word. I would look out the
window, pretend we were
in England after Trish had
gone to sleep, and if Tobi
were out or in her room, where I wanted into, too.

VI.

Tobi begins to reveal her character. Her painting style is not unlike Mary's— she's a formalist. But Tobi has no taste for mythology and loves quotidian objects, dyke scenes. She paints with absolute precision and commitment. Her personality in life belies this— she has two frequent faces, both of which are constantly bubbling over onto the surface (Trish is reserved in comparison, and a secret voluptuary). Her moods dictate either kitchen-sink humor or paranoid rage. Her tininess often necessitates loudness. By this time she has put on a good amount of

weight as well, so that her exquisite cheekbones and startling eyes are offset in a fulsome way. As is visible, Tobi is jealous of Trish on a number of levels— Trish has looks, academic distinction, and me, while Tobi scurries among potential lovers, never able to appease her conscience and settle on anyone. Between that and our amatory antics, Tobi becomes unsettled with us. When Tobi throws little parties, I act bullish— partly because I'm stoned, partly because I feel a manly sense of owning Trish and Tob. But when I leave, Trish and Tob get in big fights.

Happier now are times when Trish stays with me. Trish still enjoys experimenting with chemicals, and when she does, I oversee her. But our routines are not that different than anyone else's. We makes plans to visit Montreal at the end of the summer. By the time we get to Montreal, I realize that letting Trish plan the whole thing herself was a bad idea. We're trapped in a closet on Saint Catherine Street. It's hot. But I put on a game face and we see the sights. Trish's tremendous breakdown has been documented elsewhere. Suffice it to say it was a tense

time. Something began to break between us. Trish's freak-outs were spaced about a week apart, and were regular. It became more and more difficult to find energy with which to cope. I was burned out on her sexually as well. I dreaded having to make love to her. I was repulsed. After a certain point, I couldn't take the strain of dealing with her any longer. In late November, I broke off with her in such a way as to suggest that I needed to be harsh. I did. Her fits had taken something from me that would take some time to repair. They imposed soul damage.

I had learned that Tobi liked to bounce around. About a year after I split with Trish for the first time, I had occasion (finally) to know Tob the way I'd always wanted to. I was upstairs at the Khyber, doing my rounds (I was in charge of an arts collective, the Philly Free School, at the time), and Tob was there with her girl posse. Me and Tob were dancing and we started grinding. It was intense and pleasurable and it had been building for a long time. I took her home and knew a few things at once—this wouldn't last, wouldn't be a

marriage, and it might not even be pretty (Tobi's paranoia never being far beneath the surface). We had traveled the length of Center City and were cold, so I drew a bath. What happened in the bath and afterwards in bed was half-terrible, half-great. It was done, for both of us, just to have done it. I couldn't say, then or now, that I regretted it. But Trish was still around, had taken up with a new guy, and though I wasn't jealous (I had many lovers at the time) I still loved her. I didn't know if the story was over or not—turns out it wasn't.

VII.

All through intervening years, Trish never fully left my mind. Many encounters I lived through were pointless— one-night stands, flings, some felt, some not felt at all. When Trish reentered my life, she did so directly. Simply, we wanted each other again. Trish now lived in an apartment building, with roommates, on 49th off of Baltimore. The apartment had a fire escape large enough on which to sit, and smoke. I was in the process of beginning to publish seriously, and would often devise new strategies as I stared

off over the clotheslines and windows. We were older, less demonstrative— but we still made love almost every night. The problem was, this was interspersed with consumption of cannabis. I am soon to learn (again) that mutual intoxication cuts off intimacy. What used to be sparks between us were now ashes. There were even times when the “little death” was a bore. So that for six months we’re in a holding pattern. This time, it’s Trish’s turn to do a sudden break. Moreover, she has an older man waiting in the background. I see them together in Rittenhouse Square. I’m numb;

I believe (as is the case) that Trish is now mostly frigid. She uses her sex to ensnare and bind. But making love to a semi-frigid woman does eventually wear thin. Still, my attitude is that Trish and I could still work something out. This time, Trish never gives me a reason. The next summer there’s a fresh confrontation— Trish is very wary, and I’m more perfunctory than I seem to be. We’re buried in each other as something to express. This time, I eventually realize,

Trish is gone for good. But I make
a conscious decision to still love her, and Tob.

When I look back on the time
I spent with Trish, it occurs to me
that we never knew each other that
well. We were “mad for it,” the passion,
the romance, without being mad for
each other, exactly. What’s worth exploring is
what I know about her now. Like
this— that her aims were more strategic,
less organic, than mine. She wanted
to take me and mold me, and I
wouldn’t let her. But this was
buried beneath other imperatives. She
wasn’t strong enough to enforce her
strategies and I was too wild to tame.

The pressing question that follows is—
was it worth it? I’d say it was,
though it could’ve ended in two (or three)
corpses. We participated in these scenes
at a time during which there was little
surface-level romance in America. Bohemian
America had never been a particularly
well-populated locale, but we set up
camp there and in the process confounded
structures that we could’ve let crush us.
Our dreams weren’t especially original,
but our improvisations created a new
context for them. Neither of us came out
of Bohemia— it was a new realm for us.

Is it only because I can still sit
here, writing these lines, that our
escapades still seem like good ideas?
If we did end up corpses, who would
be the wiser? On this account, I
have no solid answers. I can only
say that for some reason, some humans
need the charm, the sparkle, the electricity
of romance, and will put their lives
on the line to attain it. So it was for
us. Those that are kith and kin to us

will understand. Those that aren't may
choose to laugh at our foolishness. But
it must be dry, accursed laughter to us...

II. Aughts Philly (Something Solid)

The Painter

The compact red book I ran around with:
Crowley's Book of the Law. I was goaded
into knowledge that a reckoning was at hand.
An archetypal Goddess had manifested as
a tactile reality in my life. An image had been
seared into my mind; a painting called 'The Vessel';
it was hers, & yet I was a married man. The only
path forward that tempestuous autumn of '01 was to
cheat. The book laid down a gauntlet of what
it meant to act in the world with a genuine sense
of destiny; to be a man who had the mettle to be
a real force of nature. She knew, my wife, that I
had been possessed, & that winds were blowing
me in a new direction, towards the forbidden.

I had, it seemed to me, no choice. The night I
spent with the painter, in a studio in PAFA, I
discovered what it meant to have a hinge to
true will about matters of the heart. She kept
paintings there, of Dionysus & Apollo, & she
would make me a myth, too. We shared red
wine that had the effect of being blood between
us; our chalice was the air, the sound of water
pipes late at night in an old building, darkened
corridors meant to hold only us, bathrooms
which could be used as portal-ways into starry
worlds. As I gathered steam, I felt the book
hover in the air as well, a piece of text writ in
boiling blood, pummeling towards spring.

The Studio

The vista which then opened was one I never could've anticipated in the Nineties—the PAFA campus was set as a series of jeweled buildings smack in the center of Center City Philadelphia, a few blocks from City Hall. Mary was then still in enough good standing to maintain her own studio on campus. I had to sign in as a guest on the ground floor every time I visited. The room was a large rectangle, & the elongated back wall was one big window, looking out on the western progression of Cherry Street, towards Broad. Until Mary & Abby, I had no fixed notions of painting; now, I dived in with the frisson of one let loose in a wonderland. Everything about Mary was magical

to me, & the canvases arrayed around the studio, largely male nudes, recumbent or not, plugged into Mary's fascination with classical mythology, & made a case for Mary as a Don Juana, a seducer of men. Heady stuff, & often Mary's tales were about men who had posed for her. Vertiginous, but I was on the verge, nonetheless, of a full-on love affair, maybe marriage, to a woman powerful enough to be called a Creatrix, a female goddess in the world, & I knew it. Sleeping with Mary meant something it never could with others; rather than a mere palliative, if you could get her to put out in the studio, you were plugging into a mythological web, glistening & intricate, stitching yourself, possibly, into history, & the come was in color—

Riot Grrrl

Prize partridge around Media, Mary was also a bad seed or rebel par excellence. She doped & fucked her way in divergent directions; got dropped into hospitals; rode with her assumed husband on a motorbike; in the parlance of the times, granting complete credulity to her tales, a wilder riot grrrl never drew breath. What mattered to me was whether I had her or not. This remained variable, as Abby also appeared, & both of us caught viable action on the side. One night she arrived by cab to Logan Square, in frilly dress, hair in a bun. I grabbed her & fucked her on the floor, & that (somehow) was it— marriage consummated. Even if Mary never really got tired of moaning about my drug shortages— Klonopins, Ritalin. Couldn't love be enough?

The only one who ever drove me into delirium fits with jealousy, Mary was. She was adept at being a little lost sheep, for anyone (curator or not) to salvage & rescue, if I had displeased her even for a night. The only one who ever made me weep from pure obsessive anguish, so that so much of my life became dramatic, I might as well have been back with the Outlaw Playwrights. I knew now how to evaluate compositions, the quirks of colorations, what the Renaissance taught us about body-soul unity; more importantly, for me, I knew what body-soul unity meant when an individual falls in love. I cannot say, the only one I was ever in love with; but the deepest sense ever was, of love running in red blood through my veins, out of my pores, into her.

Starlight

Maybe its because October nights on the East Coast can still be sultry; it was still reasonably early, 10:30; us three in our usual semi-stupefied lethargy got a rush of energy, decided to take a walk over to Fresh Grocer at 40th & Walnut, get some grub, often in short supply at 4325. I got French bread, Mary got vegetables for stir fry, for Abby too, & as we walked home what awaited us was little we didn't want. We were too stoned to be self-consciously anything, but you can bet we were stared at, with our symmetrical features, sculpted cheekbones, & yet West Philly had glitter all over it because everybody hit the street simultaneously, we walked, levitated with everyone, & everyone levitated with us—

the house party a few nights later was beyond levitational. Every young painter in Philly crowded into the lived-in, yellow lit kitchen to do whiskey shots, & drove a bunch of points home about how the city was now working together, firing off on all cylinders at once, even as Mary abstained, as usual, from alcohol, which took her nervous system & trashed it. The painters were obliging about the poet's participation, as laughter ricocheted into the grassy backyard area, with its rusty fence, small concrete plots, placing us in a city space with real green in it, even as trees began to yellow, & as the warm weather held. When the door to Mary's room shut an hour later, we took the starlight in with us, painted & owned it.

Live Forever

We had it then— not just the embedded depth of soul love, but glamour right on the ground, as the formation formed by which Mary & I spent all of our nights together. Our route— West Philly to Logan Square & back— took two disparate locales, made them whole, out of a sense that they were meant to be wed, just as we were; Logan Square with its sleek, modish urbanity, West Philly with its rusticity, climbing ivy, plus the obvious inversion of a well-worn media cliché against it. By New Years Eve, 2003, there was so much gaiety in the air, we'd pierced a hole in the obdurate, obtrusive surface of human life, to find ourselves in a tropical paradise—

I relate to it, now, as a clear demonstration that Heaven on Earth happens. In Abby, we had a soul sister; in the large co-op twin on Baltimore Ave., a safe haven; my flat in Logan Square created a different, representatively recent kind of stage; all were playgrounds where the dope, pills, every thing else was shared by all, as all of our bodies were for each other & no one else. The profound ecstasy of that New Years was that a bunch of artistic misfits found ways & means of being completely at home in the world, against constraints that needn't have been there, with a serene sense of what it might mean to live forever. We were right, then & there, to be who we were, & we knew it—

Genius Loci

West Philly swung, night by night, around all of us.
I couldn't not notice— Diana was delicately gorgeous.
She spent lots of time in the room next door.
One night, deep into the wee hours, & as
the entire house tripped (taken off, it
seemed, into distant universes, sucked into
black holes, or even flipped the switch into
primordial ooze & chaos), I swung dumbly
into Kevin's open door, found Diana tripping
on the bed, in tee & panties. As I sat down
on the bed, all that occurred to me was to
follow my instincts. The *genius loci* of that
place & time was all about nothing else, &
the sense that Diana, whose elegant lashes

& sculpted cheekbones belied her wildness,
existed as an archetype I came to worship
at the shrine of, even as music roared from
down the wood-floored hall, Mary & Abby
slept on the other side. I ascertained, later,
Diana, who I hadn't known before, had changed
her name, to stake a claim, against missing other ladies'
fun. She would become an arriviste for me, later,
also, once the two stalwarts were out of the way.
Hopefully, foggy memories would make me hesitant
to claim knowledge, more than stunted, of her
bellicose, venom-bordered insides, of a stunted child,
Lolita as painted by Goya. Lolita painted by Goya,
however, is still Lolita. Nothing child-like in that wildness.

Star Child

So, there we sat in Kim's car, for the hour's ride back from New Hope to Center City; drowsy, all three of us, on a bunch of laced weed, thinking whatever we were thinking. Kim kept putting the pedal to the metal at times slightly off. We all could've been as good as dead, if we didn't have it, but we did. What we had was a shared pact, into the air, the spheres, the universe, that whatever befell us at that time, that place, we would have to survive, because we just would. And we did. Which didn't change the state of affairs, stagnant for both of us with Kim, not brimful of anything, that whatever soporific fantasies I might've had, our taking her out to canoe on the Delaware did not result in any

consummation, & with her forgetting her purse on one of the islands, where we got even more trashed. We forgot about this, the ride home, Kim's reflexes, how the rest of our lives depended on something not proven, trustworthy. The two buddies had brains circling similarly: *nothing to worry about, go with it, understand your invincibility, it's there if you believe, it just is*. Where shields like that come from, I don't know, but I will say— exclusivity is the rule. You only depend on it if you know it's there. Off the two of them went, into the late afternoon sun, after dropping me off in Logan Square. Somewhere, a frequency in the sky consolidated itself. Gaetan didn't look like a star-child then, but he was. His magnanimity, more than a lion's, granted him nine lives.

Stoli

There was a rightness to it, a dozen of us sitting around in a circle, mostly naked, to celebrate Gaetan's birthday. The Stoli bottle circulated, taking us to a place transmuted into the right kind of drunkenness, even as a few yards away, through thick insulated walls, South Philly churned in its filthy bowels as usual. Festering, ready to toss the game for the rest of Philly, also as usual, it leered that any interested party could imbibe the right way here, get a new game on. As in, see if we could handle the rawness, realness, righteousness of being naked on what was shag carpeting. This, a room otherwise unfinished, littered with instruments, amplifiers, speakers, not many amenities to mollycoddle the posh. The bodies of all & sundry

had ways & means of being posh anyway, Anastasia clipped from a Victoria's Secret catalogue, heart-stopping as a Jersey born & bred vixen could be, calculating as Springsteen's Candy. By the time the bottle reached me, I had a lot to prove. I was compelled to say to this crowd, just by close conformity, *I belong with you*. Not that anyone noticed me in particular, or were reserved if they did. In any case, I quaffed seven or eight shots of Stoli at once. After a fifteen minute wave of utter ecstasy, which was able to unfold itself because I did it, I'd been approved, I knew I was in here the right way, I knew (also) I'd be sick if I stayed. So I quietly put on my clothes, staggered out into the autumnal mud of 13th Street, just north of Ellsworth, & my own circle closed. The length of Center City, back to Logan Square, smudged gold.

Gratis

for Mike Land

Spring '05: I swung a drunken loop from
the warehouse space back into the Highwire
Gallery itself— throngs of hipsters milling
around, whiskey, wine disappearing from
the little island space situated near
windows picking up western sun-
light, as night descended on Cherry
Street, with an ambiance of anticipation.
When anything can happen in human
life, nothing usually does— what coalesced
here, art mania, was manna to us. Avalon established
eye-contact; off we pranced to the stairwell—
Mike Land grinned lasciviously, as usual,
& polished off a beer he'd received gratis.

New Jersey Blood

I.

The first bedlam-infested Free School show:
I caught Jeremy doing his reconnaissance routine,
ribbing audience to leave. I didn't realize
then who Jeremy was, where he came from
(South Jersey), & why he worked, in Philly,
to stay (& remain) small. The Highwire shows
were too high for his, & Jersey's, leveled lowliness;
who had no recourse but to (hostilely) spy on us.
New Jersey squirmed, itchy for its children;
Jeremy slunk back, wine in hand, began snapping
pictures again. As he knelt to get a special
angle on Mike Land, who stood reading at
the podium, I remembered Avalon as a teenager,
New Jersey at midnight— waves into emptiness.

II.

The dirge droned over the dimly lit dance
floor, "Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before,"
& Tara, a bowl-headed Jersey redhead, heaved
against me. Suburban Jersey slowed her pace
like a sprained ankle; tall tales, excuses abounded
of potential husbands, other elaborate entanglements,
making it dodgy to take her too seriously.
She sought ins with us; we always said yes;
yet we bled something out of her style & self-possession.
Mike Land, who (oddly) was no dancer, drank
our grungy group under the table, in a short-lived joint
off of Rittenhouse Square— Tara made
a gesture to her girlfriend to step outside. "It's
a conspiracy;" I kidded Mike, "bring on the shots."

Unhinged

Because anything went at the Highwire, because Gaetan had a vaunted place, as Mary & Abby did, because Gaetan was intermittently one to travel with an entourage, no one was surprised to find Anastasia, with her crew, there too. She paced the polished wooden floors, knocked back red wine, huffed nitrous, & put up the requisite inaccessible, impervious front to those foolhardy enough to believe they could approach her. I, for instance, knew the ropes, & had too much to do anyway. Except, at some point in one fateful night's festivities, all the junk in Anastasia's brain, everything frozen, lazy-loafing, shy of approach, froze—nights spent following other people around, waiting to be signaled, signals sent back registering ranking,

caught up with her at last, & she exploded. Gaetan was exasperated to find her sitting in one of the windows of the gallery's west-facing façade, threatening to jump. Gaetan was a cool customer, but hit him with something unhinged, he would go into warrior mode, brusquely brush off those inexperienced, & set to work. We all watched as Gaetan leveled with Anastasia, whose drunkenness was not helping her, leading her to understand that the situation was hardly hopeless. She had a real life, friends, purpose, & everyone here cared about her. The party, as an entirety, you would think ceased, yet it did not. Not all the revelers realized the drama unfolding. Even those who did drunkenly chose to trust Gaetan. I did, too, was right to. Philly fixed Jersey that night, as was its wont.

Side-Armed

She said, undressing, to love is to be
an orphan hiding from a hurricane in
a church made of glass. Impractical, I
said, & I don't like metaphors in bed
anymore, in my old age, any more than I
like spiders. Then, as we made love, she
said, you're an orphan, hiding from a hurricane.
Oh, I said, are you a church made of glass?
Well, she said, I'm a little cracked, aren't I?
Outside, cars slithered by, oblivious, exhaust
fumes tingeing humid summer air. You're
cracked alright, & so is your sister, I see—
baited her to collapse onto my chest,
throwing stones from my glass church, side-armed—

so, she had me on her chopping
block. A month later: the City Hall court
yard blazed with summer heat. We
were over, that was it. She wanted,
she said, some order & discipline in
her life. Chinatown simmered under
our feet; I looked (futilely) for a Go
board; she bought some incense. She
turned quickly, I tried to kiss her; she
resisted; it was close. Two brains tried
to coalesce into one, about love & us.
Epochs passed; I've got order & discipline
right here, in these lines, Ruth. I trust
you understand. Much of the rest is dust.

September Heat

Sultry September: we warily followed a bar-hopping party back to a twin near City Hall, under an aegis which was not for us, & which included our enemies. Thus, dirt & grime came down, settled on our backs. Now, I blame a sense of excess which was just the Aughts; I got used to knowing a step up on a Philly ladder could be a step down. They were snorting coke in a room upstairs at this party, and, it was rumored, playing Russian Roulette. The pistol (I saw) had a silencer on it. I looked upstairs again, from the landing, at a greasy light. September shadows cast an eerie glow of nowhere—someone pushed past me, frankly, to join the affair.

The Dare: Eighteen Months

March sun gathers then loses momentum, sets
over Pine Street. The DJ ducks north on 10th,
into a normal-looking row-home: more free
dope in an untenanted wasteland— bathroom
cabinets full of it. It's worth noting to him, six
months in, that the Sword of Damocles doesn't
hesitate to make its presence felt, even with tunes
& other pleasant buzzes in the air; even with girls,
crowds, press, compliments, the way they dance
for his sets. Yet, he took the dare. This is the life
he wants. The hangman's noose at the end can't
matter. The noose is as real as this is: not for him.
He's being trailed: what he takes is being counted.
He knows. Another chilly knife-edge night. Why not?

Crowned

The routine social maintenance of our domain—
another drunken night at McGlinchey's, eyes & ears
to the ground as usual, broken then only by your
arrival. It must've been Nick who met you first,
I don't remember, but I saw you were fixated on
him. Hannah: novelist, politico, of course, but looks which
teetered ambiguously into divisiveness for those
who knew you— heavy brows, wavy hair, tall, a bit
tomboyish, also, but articulate, a charmer, & yet I
registered the sense that if I ever got you, it would
be something gratuitous, a surprise, because closed
seemed to be the fortress, & choosing Nick seemed
to betray a masochistic streak. That night, his front
swelled visibly with your arrival— I stepped back.

You were, must've been, I later realized, underwater
somehow, surveying currents, examining the wildlife,
surreptitiously & invisibly carving a watery path to me.
I had only what the male of the species always has—
the equipment to complete your circuitry, potent or
impotent in any time or context, waiting latent to
take our moment, make it crescendo through the reef,
weed, rock, as though destined, written into ocean's
records an eternity ago, when all life dwelt in the ocean,
all encounters occurred in resplendent semi-darkness.
And all this still sitting with the gang at the Glinch,
holding your own with a bunch of macho punks, who
were taking something in Philadelphia by force, me
selected silently, the tomboy an Ocean Queen, crowned—

Undulant

I'd made plans to meet you in Bar Noir
on 18th; you were there; we drank. What
happened after that, in the Logan Square
flat, is that in defrocking you knocked over
an antique lamp bequeathed to me by my
aunt in Mahopac. Serendipity, I thought,
stunned then into silence by your bedroom
élan. Outside, a sultry night simmered; this
night of all nights, scattered green glass littered
my bedroom floor, & I finally got taken, past
liquor, to what eternity was only in your mouth—
as though you'd jumped from a forest scene
(ferns, redwoods), a world of pagan magic,
into a scene still undulant with possibilities—

Denouement

Was it even you anymore? You took the podium,
began your screed: here's what Philadelphia *could* be.
The night proceeded from act to act— our enemies
were taken aback— I now boasted big-boy curating
entanglements. I knew *that* place— the wrong kind
of underwater, piranhas hungrily looking for what might
be real to rip to shreds, offal everywhere—
was not for me, just as (to be stern) you were not for me either.
All your politico postures were about barnstorming fortresses
set against you, ravishing them through pure *force
majeure*. You were pure angel/demon, Hannah. I'd
have to retreat to the back of your consciousness—
an old conquest, not especially vaunted, burrowing down
into binds to find reality, missing unreality's deliciousness—

Iguana

Sometime towards the end of the Highwire period,
Gaetan moved into a walk-up row-home in the Teens,
south of South Street, with an extended ensemble of
crazy characters and, this time, a large, languid iguana.
I had a sense of exultation, watching him linger on his
branch, in a wire-mesh encasement area, as we toked up,
as usual. I felt he understood who I was, who we were,
with an uncanny, ancient means of reptilian knowing,
not devoid of warmth, or whimsy. When Gaetan brought
him out to roam as he wished, I could see the rapport they
had was real. In a world in which you could be with, or
without, he (whose name I admittedly don't recall) was with us.
I have, now, my branch, wire-mesh encasement area, & the rest.
He's remained with me. Not speaking for Gaetan, at least.

Flaming Red Hair

The Last Drop lost its *joie de vivre* in 2009—
Dani enforced this, acting out a script
(tease/taunt/topple) written for her by
South Philly goons. Why I'm now bemused
by the gaucherie of Dani's gestures— cheap,
black, low-cut dresses worn to reveal ample cleavage,
flaming red hair styled always in plummeting
cascades— is that in '18, no one's titillated
by anything, let alone Dani— negligee stores derelict.
The truth of the imbroglio is an embarrassed
grin, about a grueling summer day enlivened
by our un-teased, un-taunted encounter. I
must say I am tempted to lie. The bathroom
door shut on us. The Drop was hollowed out.

When we emerged, it was as lovers. Why I was
the chosen I don't know. How I pined for her
on those nights the grim reality of the recession
still hadn't sunk in— as though the revelation, again,
of her breasts could deliver me from shadows
which impinged, but (it seemed) possibly only temporarily.
Once, in her Pine Street apartment, she bothered
to walk around before me in a bath towel. Why was I
a gentleman? The twist in the tale was to stick the thing in,
& thus win. The teasing, taunting then brought, it
would seem, to moot. The taste, also, of honey, then
delivered as something gracious, past mere promise.
Permission granted, then denied, pushed past,
joie de vivre visited upon the bloody-minded redhead, forever.

Incarnadine

First Friday, Olde City, autumn: I watched Abby
seduce a curator in the Artists House Gallery, clawed
my way past buskers & vendors, up again to Logan
Square; up 21st Street, over to the Franklin Institute,
out onto the Parkway, where a slight tilt will show
you the Art Museum; back over & around, & wandered
into my flat. The soft October warmth told me what
I wanted to hear, for a hot minute: eternity, ecstasy,
elevation, riding the waves on an ocean of buildings.
A general recession of waves was latent, built into us,
destined to pinch some of us to death, but in the end,
it didn't matter— Abby's striped, clinging gown that
night, leaning towards maroon & plain red, marked my
brain as permanently made incarnadine, for her & us—

Portal-ways

Was it through you, Abby, I managed to do
Queer Studies 101? Here's what I saw: you
aligned yourself with bad girls, to make yourself
look formidable, lived a life of intermittent
lassitude & discipline, tawny head bent down
to study coded missives you dared not decipher,
and then the bittersweet aftermath into postures
you earned for yourself. Girls in a row, a pretense
for an artist of your magnitude. Was that all
you had inside you? I wonder, but it's none of
my business, as the Neo-Classical portal-way
built into your brain hovers around the Earth
for a few centuries, and the paintings themselves
form a row, disciplined, formidable, coded, bittersweet—

Glass Doors

It isn't difficult for me to imagine why it might be that, outward action done for the night, Abby would stand outside Mary's glass-paneled, completely curtained double doors, & listen to us making love. All this time later, I see it as a manifestation-in-action of The Lost Twins, from Abby's own vaunted masterpiece, rising to the surface of Abby's brain, & asserting their presence. The male-leaning twin laughs at all the pushing & grunting, the sleazy cheesiness of what I have between my legs (she has one too), as though I thought it made me big in the world (it did not) to bang away at Mary as if the world depended on it. The profound dumbness of sex

& sexual intercourse mixed with the pride of her own phallic presence in the world, doing an even more manly routine of being split, being two people at once, and making both of them thrust through the surface of human life, into art taken from two places, willed into brilliant singularity, in a way the grunting moron could never understand. The male-leaning twin wins. The real girl twin remains a coy maiden, building up the guts to let herself into bed with me, jealous of Mary's easy submissiveness, as though to the manner born, of letting the man be the man, however dumb, & riding the waves towards twin peaks, rather than Lost Twins, behind glass doors.

Dresser

It wasn't real, was it, or maybe it was, us,
there, together in bed, as though you were
Mary, as though we were married, as though
you could be her, that person, generating
domestic sweets for your old man, he gnarled
after a long day of fighting in the world, ready
once again to prove potency against oppressors
who would have us cold, limp, silent, faded
in that beige-walled bedroom, lifted above
the rest of the apartment, wooden dresser catching
your eye to show up later, in a painting not related
to me, also there as someone only partially related to me,
searching the world as your own scout for signs of
visible life, the dresser livelier than me, its grains, fronts—

Feast or Famine

I knew the Manhattan you grew up in well indeed—
the Upper West Side— gruesomely built of blocks
of primitive brick & stone. But, for you, with two
orchestra musician parents, a ticket into New York
Bohemia, bagels & lox from Zabar's, then nothing,
popcorn, then back to Zabar's. Whether feast or
famine, no forced schooling for you, just days at
home with paints and canvases, from a young
age, for company, hours of repetition, breakthroughs.
Always unease, that what you wanted to paint
was too formal, too advanced, for the land
of Warhol & Koons. You were ready for Philly.
PAFA, drugs, dykes, all in preparation for
finding it, your mind's precious Rosetta Stone.

Your vision grew limpid as your life went crazy—
ensconced in the Center City beau monde,
directing traffic, wedded to an Irish witch
who wished you the worst in the end, every
distillation of visual perfection in your brain
found refulgent form, as you found time to
fall into my arms as well, & I rode analogous waves—
why it was all lost then was simple— the girls,
your girls, didn't like it. They were threatened
by a genius they knew to be easily trounced.
I never let you go. I still won't: the halcyon
nights we spent remain the guiding light of
my life, in this world & beyond, you & Mary,
& bruises or afterthoughts be damned, Rosetta Stoned—

Javelins

Artfully arranged arrows engorge hidden quivers
she carries, everywhere she goes. Each day registers
as a clarion call to the hunt. Javelins are squirreled
away for special hunt days. The self-generated mystique
of the girl warrior magus makes others nervous.
What makes it onto canvas— Spanish-colored visions
of child-like dilapidation, children blankly born into
the special dwarf dodo dance the human race does— takes,
transcendentalizes violence into a vision quest for the most
morose human truth, tripping eyes into realizations of
deep, absurd diminutions. This is a woman unused to
conventions, around that word (love) which cannot appear
in her paintings, themselves sharp like javelins. Her eyes
cannot be anything but green, but her carnivore streak is pure earth.

I cannot deign to speak of where, how, why she was raised,
except to say that what was needy in her crystallized as
her most precious asset. The child in her cannot die.
That the special circumstance is not a coincidence—
the analogous morose days I spent in Bethesda in my
own childhood, dragged unwillingly by those I
had no idea were adversaries into a matrix, corrupt
in its tininess, lying in all directions to cover up
stunted, blunt motives— can remain in the grave
where it belongs. It's all too sad. But transmuting
sadness into anger, anger into representational panache,
is what this Diana does best. She, too, would look
ravishing at the center of the Great Stair Hall.
And could laugh, here and there, at the whole thing. Between shots.

Cabinet

The painter's brain seeks the transcendental
in sensuality; once it's achieved, does the routine
maintenance work of holding it, conserving it,
memorizing it, filing it away in the special cabinet
for what makes human life, in all of its squalor,
worth living. It was taken for granted, when we
were good, that we could give each other such a life.
This marked place, I have a cabinet for, too.
The places are all marked: Logan Square, for one,
as the sunset appeared from bay windows; Liberty Place Towers
to the right, due south; the Franklin Institute due
north, courtyard full of curiosities. It is understood
that these are what make up your brain: colors,
forms, tableaux— a succession that was me for you, too.

Sultry nights in West Philadelphia were another
vocabulary for us— grass plots dotted the concrete
yard beneath your window, wood-paneled floor, wooden
dresser taking our tripped-out trysts, making them
rustic. A poet's brain transcendentalizes language &
philosophy— I always trusted as secure, what
started with you & sense. Grounded in sense,
right there on Baltimore Avenue, was an implicit
engagement with taking what was banal in
the script of our consciousness, shaking it loose.
It's all in my own cabinet now, about shock, spark.
No one ever gave me a better life— pathways
from sense to oversoul-level awareness, fastening
color to what could remain uncolored. Passions.

III. Letters to Dead Masters: An Epistolary Novella

#3

Percy,

Certain critics have always claimed to see some naïve idealism in your poems, Percy, but you're right— if America had any idealism left, we wouldn't be stuck like a charred steak in the meat grinder we're in now. I think about this, I think about the drowning exercise you did to prepare for your encounter with Mr. Friends-with-the-Super-Conformists, I think about the fact that you enjoyed guitars and guitar music, and I come to no pertinent conclusions. The Fugazi Fighters came into the Grind today and I was forced to do my work within earshot of them. Their whole dish is that the Internet has not only destroyed their capacity to sell records, it's made touring impossible because nothing's broken down by region anymore— their fan-base is atopic. I've been watching these guys operate, with some limited success, for ten years— but it's always with the restraining impulse that nothing remarkable has happened yet, no bounds have been broken, no rivers crossed. How can I describe their music— it's like the noise a cat makes when heaved into a bathtub, amplified a hundred times. Not, of course, that I've ever heaved a cat into a bathtub. In other news, on these oppressively hot days I'm driven to drink; the impulse is escapist, transcendental, and practical. I can walk into a liquor store and buy several hours of obliviousness. I've been drinking Black Velvet whiskey, which is cheap, but there's an elegance to the packaging that gives me confidence— a black label, lettered in gold. I think, without, I hope, degenerating too much towards the maudlin, of all the girls in my past, how I romanticized everything about them, turned them into archetypes, figured out their equations. I wound up spawning empty flasks, blackened but with gold lettering, stitched into poetry journals, libraries, and homes around the world. Yes, where crass hype is concerned, I'm commensurate with the Fugazi Fighters. I'd like to hope that a transcendentalist bent can redeem a he-man's cravings and exploits, but it's not for me to determine.

I can sense how appalled you'd be by Philly, Percy; skyline sunk in summer smog, streets lined with trash reliably as the sun sets, girls that in 2010 no longer think in terms of love, or kisses, or tenderness, but in terms of dalliances with strychnine. I can watch the SEPTA trains, as you know, from my window, and if there is a West Wind pushing them, I don't hear it. All is vacancy here, beneath the surface; all is silence and solitude, disguised by the shrieking noises that might as well be the Fugazi Fighters, who are playing tonight at Johnny Brenda's. Someday, if you're up for a good horror story, I'll tell you about all the shows I used to go to in Philly, even shows I played myself: the mood of conscious and calculated dissipation, the sense of totalized futility, the incredibly acrid taste of a pair of unfamiliar female lips that has a hand on you and a hand on a Heineken. But I'll save that for next time.

Fond Regards,
Adam

Percy,

I think your life, the way in which you handled your art, vindicates this— there is an endless fecundity that can only be encountered in and produced by solitude. In the last six months, I have spent more time alone than at any other point in my life, and I've just had breakthrough after breakthrough. Why is everyone in America so eager to be surrounded by others? People so desperately want the appearance, the illusion, of being loved and cared for. No one can stand to be seen alone too much, because it proves you must not be desirable. I used to carry on this way too, but I've given it up. In any case, I saw Dana last night walking up South Street with a bunch of minions. She was (I assume) going to show them all the little plots where she has planted different things: vegetables, herbs, flowers. Dana was wearing dark-tinged sunglasses, had her hair in a ponytail and looked quite the little cadet. In fact, she looked so impressive I didn't realize at first that it was her. It also doesn't help that I never see her anywhere except at the Grind. I realized that Dana is also crippled in the mating game because she never goes anywhere alone. For one and one to make two, there have to be, initially at least, two ones; unless, of course, it's a double date. There are a few new schizophrenics who have been keeping things interesting, where the Grind is concerned— a woman with black hair, oiled against her head, that wears what look like Halloween pirate outfits and has bright pink lipstick smudged across her mouth; and a black dude who mumbles angrily to himself and looks for excuses to get in arguments with passers-by. The woman is by far the greater nuisance; she's always asking for cigarettes, and will think nothing of asking four or five times, even if I won't give her one. The black dude keeps to the other side of the street, and seems intimidated by the vast classiness and pristine condition of the Grind. Oh, and there's a new girl working at the Grind, too. Her name, apparently, is Kris, and she's another blonde, bustier and more filled in than Dana, but much more reserved, quiet, inconspicuous, and less likely to have mercy on me.

This is all very limited— the stasis of my days, the sense that I want to be somewhere else a lot of the time but I don't know *where* else. This can't be in the tradition of Sartre's great café writing because I'm not only not tackling ontology, I haven't even got around to nausea yet. Even as I try to hail to these blithe spirits, I realize that, as in that Huxley book whose name I don't recall, I rather wish your skylark would drop a mess in someone's eye. I've dropped any number of messes in my life, usually into my ladies (and I don't just mean carnal messes), but my messes are now so locked up into my own narcissistic reveries that there would seem to be no way out. The sludge and sleaze of Philly is, for once, a perfect objective correlative; maybe the universe is trying to tell me that I really do belong exactly where I am, for once. On top of Liberty Place.

Fond Regards,

Adam

P.S. I remembered the Huxley book: Point Counterpoint. The prankster character, Mark Rampton,

is a stand in, they say, for D.H. Lawrence. Living in Philly for a dozen years has turned me into a stand in for D.H. Lawrence, too, only I manage also to be Mellors. Ha!

Percy,

Dana just walked by in a sleeveless white shirt (in today's parlance, a "wife-beater"), jeans shorts, smoking a Camel. I didn't realize this about Dana; just through being a customer here, I become her underling. Her logic seems to run like this: I'm an artist and I work here, which makes me the big artist here. Dana takes little pictures of pretzels and sculptures, which act on the wall here as territorial pissings, but mostly she makes puppets; and the other guys that work here are DJs. Their DJ nights are well attended: they're an urban success. Yet, the postures these guys put on entertain me. They're united in totalized and overweening snobbery, which suggests that dealing with *you* is about as pleasant as stepping in dog shit. There's one I always seem to have problems with; whoever I go out with, he suddenly wants; and he hates me for suggesting, to his face, that most Philadelphians are crass materialists. It's probably the first time he heard the word "crass." Even if the populace might be no different in Idaho. It's funny to have been coming to a place like this for ten years; to see some of the same faces at thirty-four I did at twenty-four. Oddly, this place isn't reducible for me to the girls I've met here; once you've done genuine, marriage-level relationships, the little smushes don't matter that much, with some exceptions. The difference between 2000 and 2010 is the scope and texture of my illusions. In 2000, I was hot on the trail of fame and fortune—these were the panaceas that would grant me a flawless existence. I still believed all the rock dudes were authentic artists, and was being duly initiated into the cult of post-modernism. Things were leveled so that Warhol (or Nauman) and Bowie (or Dylan) and Picasso (or Joyce) meant more or less the same thing. All distinctions were collapsed, and my mind's buffoonery was complete. Nothing materialized; I showed up at the wrong place at the wrong time, playing the wrong chords in the wrong order. In other words, I was a mess. And I learned quickly that there's nothing the Philly art press (to the extent that you could call it existent) hates more than earnest ambition. Be a worm like us, and get your plugs—that's their m.o. But I was a surprisingly resilient train-wreck and by the end of the year started publishing my poems seriously. Now, books get to be the Nazz, as does the enlightened elitism of there being nothing outside the text, arbitrary signifiers be damned.

The big illusion I subscribe to these days is "been there, done that." Marriage reinforces this; I've more or less been married several times. But having kids creates a sort of equalizing essence, transforming individuals into human smushes, and I'm not there yet. I look at all the girls who come in here as potential mothers. For a young writer, a chastening voice narrates, you had better plant as many seeds as possible before you have kids. Unfortunately, no pre-programmed bell rings to let you know you've planted enough seeds. I do get in complacent moods, in which I flatter myself that enough seeds have been planted; but in art, the insatiable will says, there is never "enough." This weariness before true weariness is at least preferable to being a spastic post-adolescent. Who burns.

Yours in buffoonery,
Adam

Percy,

The girl named Kris who works here is wiping down tables right in front of me. In some moods, I say, this never gets old for me; the female form and figure, its' contours, lights, the things in it that do dances. But as I get older, I find myself getting bored with my own physical reactions to girls. It's not just that I've been promiscuous; it's that in doing it, I've created an engine that never ceases revving and humming. Kris leans over and my blood starts to boil— what else is new? Truly, Kris deserves better than me; someone more attentive and more sensitive. Rather than going for the straightforward blazon, I might as well pierce right through to the main dish about Kris; I've been told she likes to do sucker-punch flirtations with guys. If I'm more of a sucker than most, I at least have some fine and feisty ways of withdrawing before any damage is done. Dana also likes to wander in, even on days when she doesn't work. They look rather like the Doublemint Twins together. I can feel them trying to figure me out, but they won't have much luck. I'm enough past figuring out that I've given up the attempt myself. The DJ behind the counter is having a rough day; you can see it in his slumped shoulders and perpetual grimace. I keep thinking that Saturday night might have been one of their big parties; I'm not sure. But, I've noticed, DJs are like creative artists in that they lead an up and down life. Spinning the wrong record at the wrong time is like striking out; too much trance at once like fumbling; and if you decide to go retro, even for a few songs (think Depeche Mode, or mixing Blur with Daft Punk for the rock kids), you had better be prepared to face the consequences. Or, it could be that the recession has forced people out of the clubs; you can't dance at home, but you can drink and screw. I do feel this guy's pain, as it has come to my attention that the festive aspect of the arts has been sullied; when resources become scarce, people hunker down. So I'm hunkered down over my coffee, pretending not to notice Kris's ample cleavage. Days like this, you feel you're scraping the bottom of the barrel, just because the energies around you are stagnant. Human stasis becomes so dictatorial, once it sets in, that it might as well be crowned emperor. And oh what a domain.

I can't exactly get behind this letter, because I'm perturbed, caught in yet another academic fracas. It resembles what you might call power square dancing; swinging your partners that they might be hurled over cliffs. First it's scary, then tedious; eventually, it makes *Against the Grain* look like *Call of the Wild*. Not that the dances I did with Wendy Smith and Julie Hayes (Boston and Temple, respectively) weren't the real *Call of the Wild*. Between Kris (who is right here, wiping tables again demurely) and power square dancing, I'm about ready to de-anchor the Ariel and sail right into a storm. And I do mean Mary Shelley.

Drowning,
Adam

Percy,

In December 1915, Picasso wrote a missive to Gertrude Stein which begins, “my life is hell.” The world was largely a charnel ground, then and now. And as you live through the decomposition of an empire, you realize that everything gets burnt, nothing is spared. But then, I wouldn’t be having these thoughts if I watched television. It is an opiate for the masses on an unforeseen scale; a thought-repellent that guarantees, like certain sedatives, a good night’s rest. What do I do between 7 and 11? Nothing—I look at the walls, note how shadows start creeping with greater and greater rapidity in August, then try to ignore the light created by the top of the utilities building across the street (as it flashes the time, temperature, advertisements, etc). That kind of time, *raw* time, filled by interior realities rather than exterior ones, has been losing ground for sixty years. That’s why the academics can never be too penetrating about someone like Beckett; you’ve either lived with *raw time* or you haven’t. It doesn’t have to be a lazy wallow— all kinds of surprising connections manifest, as your mind creeps out into the universe. Who knows, you might think; maybe there are races of beings out there who’ve subsisted for 200 billion years. They probably perceive us to be spoiled babies. If you choose to stay grounded, you may have the realization that each of your lovers secretly hates you. The human race who bother to love at all, love what they hate and hate what they love. That’s why Trish Webber, for example, was always giving me things and then taking them back: devotion, attention, willingness to submit in a wifely way. Love and hate in her could never resolve. The application of a non-palliative becomes palliative just in itself, in this kind of daze, with thoughts of this depth— you feel subtle currents run through you, moving you towards some kind of totalized realness or reality. Throw in kids and a wife, and you can forget about *raw time*; on this level, I still savor bachelorhood. A conventional situation will never do for me; I have no idea how I’ll be permitted to configure these things. Except freakishly.

Talking about conventional situations, I got to the Grind early today, in order to give me some time with Picasso unimpeded; I like his early stuff. Across from me sits Reed, who fronts a large jazz-rock band in the mold of the Weather Report. He’s got on a Gilligan hat, and a black vest over a blue polo; he’s working at his laptop. This guy is my friend on Facebook, and I’m on his e-mail list. After we exchange brief nods, I realize he’s lost about fifteen pounds since I last saw him. He’s either four or five years younger than me, I’m not sure. But he carries himself with the affected assurance of the eternal up-and-comer; the one who always wants to tell you, *boy have I got plans; and this time (for once) there’s no looking back*. Truth be told, I was in this position for many years; I’ll never forget that claw in my stomach that always said the same thing— *something remains unproven, and you may or may not be able to prove it*. That’s the arts— a high school with few graduates. And if you’re a poet, you can graduate and stay broke. To be Darwinian, I’ve got all the varsity “Vs” I need, and this guy doesn’t. All the same, I wish him the best. Especially as there aren’t too many graduates in Philly, and our version of “Arts High” is the inverse of Ridgmont— slow-paced and dull. But you better not start whining about what’s in Manhattan, because nothing is. Yours, Adam

John,

The awful pain of human existence— people don't reveal themselves. If you are surrounded by others who mislead you (as most of us are), people project things onto you without you realizing it; you find yourself in pain, and don't know why. Who knows? Maybe after this life, we get taken someplace where we can see people's true intentions and motivations, and that's why and how people get ranked there. On the ground, things are cloudy. It is cloudy in Philly today, and I'm sitting next to two old geezers talking local politics. These feelings have come up because I can tell they don't like each other much; I also detect real devotion between them; and when the conversation lapses, they stare at their coffee cups. City politics in Philly has always amused me, because the mayor and his minions always work from the same platform: "Philly's a great place, let's make it even better." Ride this thought out and you realize the mayor of Cincinnati (and Detroit and Houston and, moving farther down the line, Hoboken) has to say the same thing. Other than these geezers, the Grind is more or less deserted; one guy is leaning against the wooden counter adjacent to the tables, working on his laptop. Being alone at a café like this is a good metaphor for trying to be a serious writer in America in 2010. The crazes and manias around national politics have put them, for me at least, off limits. And it isn't just that the politicians don't show themselves—it's that the gaudiness and the inanity of what they show looks like a parody of American party politics (already devolved into self-parody) in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and Aughts. Watching any one of these guys (or gals) is like watching a scorpion sting itself to death— perversely fascinating to see once, sickening over a prolonged period. All the little Jewish guys I used to hang out with like to follow the D.C. details; they want to talk about the moves made, bills passed, etc. But once it really sinks in that you *can't* make a difference, and there is no hope of doing so, why follow the "deets"? One dude in particular loved the minutiae; for him, I'm sure it still works better than hand lotion (if you know what I mean). I see it like this: with broken compacts on all sides, who wants to talk about responsibility? In 2010, maybe it's 60-40 in my favor to remain politically uninformed. Liberal activists stick their fingers in sockets and wonder why they end up doing their shits (dying) in some sinecure's office. I never say these things out loud, cause what's the point?

Funny thing about Trish Webber: how mum she was about politics, and political commitment. Tobi Simon was similar. Hard-line aesthetes, they defined themselves as artists who contributed to human society by being creative. Can the brain which holds and manifests the sublime hold and manifest the political? Then, there's the politics of the sublime, in a show biz country at a show biz juncture, when all show biz tycoons have to do is mutter *more people*, and intellectuals and artists with little popular draw are expected to retreat. With everything Trish Webber said and did, it was obvious that she had employed the broadsword of her brain and chosen to say and do it. A big swords girl, Trish. But a political commitment junkie like Heather Mullen could only find Trish both trying and infuriating. When we were doing the

Free School shows, John Rind and I fell into a dozen sort-ofs, on this level. We sort-of defined a sort-of ethos, sort-of relatable, sort-of practicable. Heather tried to be patient with us, but was obviously looking for something more committed, more full-throttle. We said we were a School, didn't we? Tobi Simon was sort-of queer, and this filled in some space as a sort-of ethos for her, as queerness did for John Rind, too. For full-on, full-throttle political commitment, those around us looked to Heather Mullen, not us. Who was happy to traipse past us when she saw what the score was. The verdict is what it is, for me: the sublime and political commitment make extremely uneasy bedfellows, *more people* be damned.

A guy I know, an adjunct at U of Arts, just sat down next to me. He stole a girl from me once (this is five years ago) who's now, oddly enough, a full-time activist in D.C. When I knew her in Philly, she was an aspiring novelist working confessional territory. Heather! I remember reading with her at the Khyber and the nights that preceded it. She called me, in a brief albeit intense domestic interlude, "pumpkin." In any case, I have to get out of here; between the heat, the humidity, and the adjuncts, the Grind is starting to oppress the living hell out of me. Alone, Heather may return. With it, the realization that I've never understood the Tao of who stays in my life, who doesn't, and why it has to be a woman calls you pumpkin after a few astonishing rolls in the hay and then disappears forever.

Politically,

Adam

John,

Old Rassy showed up at the Grind today. She's been a presence in the Philly poetry scene since the 1970s. Her way of life seems strange, so I'm assuming there must be some kind of trust-fund behind it; every few years she opens a business (the last two being a restaurant and a used bookstore) that does little and quickly fails. The few poems I've seen from her are undistinguished; the kind of semi-autobiographical memory-poems that sometimes get into the big print dinosaurs. But I used to do readings at her little bookshop in the days when I still wrote Allen Ginsberg pastiches and she was somewhat supportive. Now, the situation is more drastic; for various reasons, I can't look at Rassy and she can't look at me. Without undue hubris, I will say that Rassy probably feels I put her out of business, but what can I do? This is a woman that's never read anything earlier than the 1950s, and dotes on her status as a historical naif. That's the Philly attitude towards the higher arts—you don't need to know anything cause you don't need to do anything either. So I'm sitting here reading Keats—what do Rassy and I have to say to each other?

The problem, if there is one, is that so much of Rassy is in Wendy Smith, too. Not that Wendy keeps opening businesses, with fat-of-the-land money, and closing them in short order. She does not. But that the mentality of living on said money is rampant in poetry, part of the inbred culture, and it makes the whole enterprise of poetry in the United States a festering one. Wendy has it: she's sexy. And she does *little girl lost* with more panache than any poetess I've ever seen. Her racket, however, Heather Locklear-as-serious plumber of female depths, is punctured and at least slightly deflated by a surfeit of material goods which are always at her disposal. That, and the impending shadow of a formidable family meaning she never has to struggle for anything. Larsen warned me of these things when Wendy and I did our famous dance, all those years ago. He was right—it was to be a brief one. When I see Rassy, I see a mirror image of everything in Wendy which could be right, but isn't. Especially because, I would opine, Wendy is the poetess, strong and subtle, which Rassy can never be. Wendy's given everyone, as Rassy has, an easy way of counting her out. All of these thoughts swim around my head ineffectually; the poor stay poor, the rich get rich, right? And the unclassifiable freaks like myself make malarkey confusing the whole game.

Reed is apparently making a pit-stop at the Grind each day a daily ritual; he does his work standing up, shuffling, trying to impress someone. Kris is friendly and chipper; short shorts rolled up even farther, so that I (half) remember my age and quickly turn. One crazy lady, who looks rather like mid-period Joni Mitchell, stops every day to look at the big clock that hangs over the Grind's coffee machines. I do get a strong sense that no one is really moved by anyone else, and I wonder if that's what 2010 is, what it means. Years sometimes do have their own identities and perhaps this is the year of parallel lines. Where interpersonal relationships are concerned, the Net is, for the most part, a generator of parallel lines, so I'm being scrupulous in these accounts and not including my life on the Net. When I see what I'm

seeing right now, the oldest of the DJ crew at the Grind (almost 40) arriving on a rather rudimentary bicycle, I know that the current malaise cuts across all lines, so that people reveal all the ways they are not being cared for. And if I'd stayed planted in the social nexuses I started from in Philly, I wouldn't be alive to write this now. Which doesn't mean, of course, that I don't miss drugs sometimes; it's only been five years since I acid-tripped with John Rind in the Grind's quite dungeon-like basement. Luckily, I held all my marbles together; the dude I was with, John, a fiction writer who was helping me put together shows, rapidly became catatonic and Boo Radley-ish. We had a friend right around the corner on Lombard, and she let us crash briefly. In that interval, we drank and smoked more pot on top of the acid. I went through several phases with drugs where I could handle anything; that was one of them. But the sad, demented, reprehensible truth is that for all the coldness of maturity, for all that 2010 is what it is, I'm happier now.

Being in the arts (or any creative field) in your twenties tends to be, for many (myself included), a party. No one's made it yet (or, if you've made it, you haven't *really* made it), but you just generally make the base-line assumption that everyone you know has a decent shot. People take drugs to have fun. But if you hit your thirties and nothing happens, things get ugly, and drugs become just a means of numbing yourself. Fun gets taken out of all the old equations. If you want to make it, you have to cut people off, and there is no choice. And the world becomes so much like an acid trip that you go up and down every day. At least that's how my cookie crumbles....and I've been in the oven a dozen years now. And if Trish and Tob, two more unclassifiable freaks, ever make it onto the freak-baking sheet, it'll be because I've placed them there.

Sans Classification,

Adam

George,

The Grind is deserted today. But crowds come in waves here, and it may be filled in half an hour. I'm wondering if the Grind has been cutting back on its staff— it's starting to be the same two DJs behind the counter every day. The guy there now is one of the long-term Grind dudes; Lisa and I used to call him the "indie ape" in the old days. Simian appearances aside, he's relatively amiable, and though we've never had what amounts to a chat, his grunts in my direction seem to express approval. All of a sudden, here he is: the leader of the Fugazi Fighters, wearing L.A. shades, black jeans and a white t -shirt, shoulder-length black hair matted down over his eyes, handle-bar moustache adding a sinister tinge to his image. As he gets closer, I realize he's also sporting cowboy boots. Are we down by the old corral, or what? This guy's whole machismo/braggadocio aspect is derived from touring (which is a form of cowboy shit)— that he's seen the world and you haven't. This does raise a salient point about humanity— how much do people vary from region to region? Is human nature fixed and immutable enough to make travel (and musicians who "cowboy posture") a red herring? I say this because I have some jealousy of the Fugazi Fighters and of those better-traveled than myself. With this guy, I sense it's a moot point; he sees a van and a club and a club and a van. But I've never known if there's some sacred mystery that could only unfold were I to travel to Egypt, or Italy, or Greece. Whether there is a mystery is still a mystery to me. Where the Fugazi Fighters are concerned, the case is closed— they'll never graduate from clubs to larger venues, and so the race is to demonstrate the most grandiose pretension. They're all in cahoots with the DJs who work here; it's a nice, mutually legitimating arrangement on both sides. Since I have no immediate travel plans, I do listen in to some of their conversations; it's the usual indie rock fare: vans breaking down, venues with good or bad PA systems, places with a bad rep they're now avoiding. I think of what would've happened had I stayed in rock— nothing. For better or worse, I have to accept that just words works better for me. And in any case, I never had too many epiphanies in my foreign excursions— I liked climbing Mont Real with Trish, Piccadilly, Bath, and especially the reggae bands set up at pool-sides in the Bahamas. I've done the major U.S. cities except for L.A., and I can imagine 240 cloudless L.A. days in the 80s in a row, and the thought leaves me speechless.

I've hauled out the Wordsworth to start working again, but am having a difficult time getting in gear. The thing about academic work is that it can't be approached like a normal task— you have to be precisely in the right state of mind to make any progress. With shit hitting the fan on all sides, that delicate balance gets jounced to the extent that I might as well be reading the City Paper. Speaking of which, the Philly weeklies are contracting; shrinkage seems to be the name of the game in print publishing these days. *Rolling Stone* is reduced to the size of a comic book, and eventually the "Random Notes" will just be shots of Baby Boomer rock star's graves. Kids today don't buy *Rolling Stone*, or the Rolling Stones. Pop culture is a headache for which there is no cure; the tyranny of numbers. For Wordsworth, valium will

suffice. Luckily, I've got half a handful in with my Advil.

Speaking of headaches, Trish and Tob were an amusing spectacle together about pop culture, show biz, what have you. Trish could never warm towards a good old-fashioned trodding of the boards, in any respect. Show biz was seen to be kids stuff. Yet, as Tob and I both knew, Trish's obsession with sex and drugs created an impasse for her, through which she was constantly surrounded with show biz types. Or those with show biz affinities, which both Tob and I had. Trish was thus forced to compromise, allow a bunch of realities she would consider to be *declassé* to both touch and involve her. Willy-nilly, Trish wound up knowing everything there was to know about classic rock, for example, because it's the music I grew up on, and it never got old for me. Trish adjusted to Zeppelin, Floyd, and the rest. Through Tob, Trish faced a forced immersion in dykes and dyke-ism, and the dykes were often very low-down, culturally. Tob's mid-Aughts stint as a rock princess was difficult for Trish to take. Not, I didn't think, out of jealousy, but specifically because she was disappointed with how Tob pandered to the Philly dykes, who liked gawking at the pretty bisexual she was. When the two lady painters argued, swords were drawn, and the positions they took never changed. Tob was errant, Trish would suggest; was betraying a basic faith that her paintings were the most solid thing she had to offer the world. Trish, Tob would offer right back, was a meddling fool who had no right to interrogate anything Tob did. Trish was an ignoramus about queerness, what it meant to be queer in the world; and if Tob seemed fly-by-night, it was because she was living in a world and a space too complex, too bizarre, for Trish (or me, half the time) to decipher. It was Advil time, indeed— no one tended to win. Except to say that they both had a fiercely self-righteous streak governing their postures, making it so that with their heels mutually dug-in, it was ten sheets to the wind to get them home, so to speak, and by the last bunch of years what was over between them remained over. Classic rock and rock princesses aside, the paintings themselves must decide their legacy for them.

Pilled,

Adam

John,

I'm taking the day off from the Grind. From my windows, I look up at a sickly grey-white sky and wonder whether the Earth really is moribund. The view from said windows is comically poor, a gush of ugliness without precedent; the big black Utilities building on the right, train-tracks leading to Thirtieth Street Station in the center, a four-story parking garage to the left, and, off in the distance, a series of clunky old buildings that make Twenty -Third Street one of the great eyesores of Center City. What really sticks about this moment is just the imaginative sense I have that this is 1930. How many of us think how it might have felt to be alive between 1930 and 1945? To live through a Great Depression followed by a World War must've been so hellish that those of us spawned in the cocoon of late century XX America can barely fathom it. Fifteen years of agony, and it seems to me that 2010 heralds the beginning of another Great Depression. If this is the case, we can expect the media won't say anything about it; agony doesn't sell (though what's sold is often all-too-agonizing.) But there's just something about the sky that doesn't look right, the bars half-empty, coffee shops desolate, bad indie bands reduced to jealousy of poets, and I have a feeling that it's all going to coalesce into a kind of marshy, slow-burn maelstrom. I might as well mention that Dana seems to have settled on one of the DJs as some kind of long-term "novia." He's safely stationed not a rung above her, and I just took the phone call that let me into this pertinent info. I also get the sense that they might be one of those sham couples that never actually has sex. It reminds me of 2006, when about a dozen poets blew into town from Boston. Many of them were paired off, but I noticed that the couples wouldn't touch. I later learned that two of the guys were gay. It was my introduction into serious po-biz, where nothing is as it seems. If you ask an average yeoman about poetry, they'll think trees, birds, flowers, stars, all spoken with the fulsome disinterestedness of Mr. Rogers. The truth, and it is a laughable one, is that the poetry world (or po-biz) is every bit as corrupt, cynical, image-oriented, fickle, and vicious as any other business. It's just, of course, that no one but the poets are watching. It was that way in 1820 too, of course, so I'm happy to tell you that a knife-in-the-back greeting for any name poet is still protocol. Especially for someone like myself, not queer enough to be there the right way.

Even if the Earth is moribund, there are still some laughs to be had. Like the fact that one of my Facebook friends actually answers his own status updates in his comments box. Facebook is not the best forum for solipsistic reverie, but if you're going to do it, why not be full-on about it? This guy is, in fact, a professor in Louisiana, and one of the save-the-earth types who needs everyone to know about what birds he's just seen, what flora and fauna impresses the most, just how ugly the situation is, and that he, for one, is taking matters in his own hands. But the sad fact is that he's right and I'm wrong. And the fact that I'm wrong, combined with the fact that Dana might or might not be getting fucked by one of the Grind DJs, has put me in a sulky mood. It's hard to picture Dana, who never seems to have had a boyfriend before, doing these things, but her inexperience is one reason I shouldn't be thinking

about her. The dreadful foreboding comes that she's never even been to first base before. Those Boston poets dispersed when they realized just how brown and black all the Philadelphian blood runs. What did they think they'd find in Philly? A few of them started with me at Temple, and quickly dropped out; a few more were only biding time before an imminent move to Italy. Ah, the glamour and prestige of the transient life. And here I am, still in Philly, having learned something about the wages of this kind of sin. The basic idea is this: if you lead an easy life, and have always lead an easy life, your life becomes pointless and miserable. Human life is inherently transient enough; the poets who flit from place to place usually do so to escape the suspicion that what they least want is to live. It's a fag game, and a fagged out game, too. But I do want to live, even on days when the sky looks like it slipped out of the anus of a mammoth reptile.

On a day like this, the raw time factor moves in and takes hold, and I'm left to explore what the significations of *raw time* are, what it really means. Of course, we know, from Kant, science, and elsewhere, that there is no such thing as time per se. The idea or conception of time is something our brains are trained to impose on the raw reality of matter, of the universe. Time is just a way of saying that matter is at work, doing its slow crawl of changing form, bit by bit, forever, within a charmed circle or cosmic egg that changes, without changing. The consciousness of raw time, then, has to be, that the show which is staged, for our delectation, arises from the structure of our own brains. Whatever the brain casts up, takes center stage. The changes then flow from a stream in our own consciousness, rather than allowing exterior contingencies to dictate our thoughts, which could manifest in images, also, too, or emotions. The horror of Dana Blasconi— she wields an axe, against this process. Stuff your brain, numb it, turn it off. Lots of life force energy, though. Self-willed in an individualized way. While I'm in *raw time* mode, Dana absurdly breaks in to establish or lay down the gauntlet of who she is. Dana herself might have a rough time accepting the eternal nature of herself. It's matter, Ms. Blasconi— once you're in, you're in. Dana nods. Sometimes I get the sense that Dana knows more than she thinks she does. Even if the weight of what's past the cave walls has to land on me to really know it. And experience a vision that calls for a certain amount of jurisprudence, if you, or I, want the brain-generated stage-show to move towards a rousing finale.

Egged,

Adam

George,

Last night I went on Netflix and had a look around. I settled on “Halloween” because for some reason it was offered for free. If you are a movie director aspiring to be an artist, horror is an unfortunate genre; the conventions don’t usually allow the nuances, complexities, levels and layers that constitute serious work. “The Exorcist” comes close, especially because so few viewers realize what the essential gist of the movie is: how Pazuzu gets Merin. “Halloween,” also, comes close, except for one unfortunate flaw in the movie’s structure, a plot glitch: how does Michael Myers, who has been incarcerated since the age of five, get behind the wheel of a hijacked car and contrive to successfully drive two hundred miles to Haddonfield? One imagines the absurd vignette of a man in a rubber mask looking at a Texaco road map, raising his hand in a friendly gesture as someone allows him to pass, and giving the middle finger to a tail-gator. Movies, I’ve noticed, are almost always dotted with these glitches, and the idea of precision is hard to execute if you have two hours to fill. The artsy directors that get fetishized, especially the foreign ones, dote on little experiments in structure, narrative, and form, but I believe that the movie is still a young form and in its adolescence. Poetry, of course, goes back thousands of years, and if you attempt to successfully assimilate the history of poetry you wind up a thousand years old. There is some deadness to poetry that makes it live most thoroughly in one context— eyes following words on a page or screen. In comfortable, relaxed surroundings, live readings can work; and listening to mp3s online can work too. I’ve thought of doing an entire reading in a Michael Myers rubber mask; anything to liven up the very rote, very timid, tepid scenario of the standard meat-grinder poetry reading. But when the words work, when they take you someplace, it can be more fun than any pop culture shenanigans, simply because highs, frissons, are better if you have to work to get them.

The Grind seems to be heating up, and at my age (at least for now) I’m reduced to playing a voyeuristic role. Dana’s got her DJ by the hand; they sit down at one of the special tables designated (by an unspoken role) for employees and their friends. The nuance is this; *I could* sit down at one of these tables; I’ve earned enough respect to not get booted; but I don’t mind watching from a distance. Also, it’s interesting exploring the psychology of the voyeur from the inside; why he/she watches, what he/she is watching for; is it pure prurience, or something else? For me, there is some prurience involved, but it’s mixed with a certain mature playfulness, as someone who’s been through these games any number of times and is curious as to how they are now played. For instance, I now know that this relationship hasn’t been consummated. Once two people have had sex, their bodies take on certain postures in regard to each other, and there are subtle but telltale marks of possession that men in particular manifest. Dana is as sprung and as volatile as ever; there is nothing languorous about her posture or her speech. It seems to be, as I predicted it would be, a sham relationship, based on a mutual need to appear involved. Why is it that so many people need to look (and feel) involved? Everything in our culture points to the absolute necessity of appearing to be loved and wanted. Americans make massive sacrifices just to present a façade of desirability. Dana, with all her blue collar bumptiousness, falls right into this trap without realizing it. The DJ is just glad no one’s

going to give him vibes as if he might be gay. I wish I could say there was something endearing about them together, but there really isn't. It's also a synecdoche of a larger social issue in 2010: the sudden predominance of celibacy in everyone's lives. This is a Depression, and, to be blunt, one learns that in a Depression, no one fucks. I believe this crosses all kinds of social lines, and no strata remains untouched. As someone who, in the last twelve months, has had any number of opportunities to forge sham relationships, I'm glad I've opted for "simple single." If I hadn't been single, I wouldn't have written the poems and other things that have made my name in the past year. But, oh what a waste Dana is. You could put on a Michael Myers rubber mask, and if you offered her a million dollars she'd marry you; without consenting, of course, to spend any nights. I'll wait patiently for John Carpenter to make a movie about it. And for Jamie Lee Curtis to win an Oscar for a portrayal of Dana in which all her friends gets slaughtered and she gets spared. Look out, Kris.

Sweet Nothings,

Adam

Percy,

Things have come to a boil rather more quickly than expected. Today at the Grind, a very pixilated Dana sat down across from me without saying a word. I've noticed that even when she dresses sexy (and she was), she exudes an air of innocent contrivance. She then went into one of her tirades; her DJ was just too unreliable, too into her body not her soul, too deliberate in his moves, too insistent. I knew instantly that, for lack of a better category to put me in, she had turned me into "the friend." It's funny, I thought, to be 34, to have been through innumerable situations with innumerable girls, and then be reduced to playing "friend" again. But because just through the way she reaches across the table, the way she forces herself to touch me at times, Dana comes across as hitting on me as well. This is done, as I said, with an air of innocent contrivance; Dana wants to appear like she knows what she's doing. All the same, I had some very snap decisions to make. If I side with her against the DJ, I run the risk of Dana deliberately setting up a confrontation. I get to be her big Ivy League intellectual, who can put this guy down with such cold rationality that he may never prowl the streets of Philly again. If I dare to side with the DJ, she'll go into a rant concerning the fact that look, these guys all hate you, you can't side with them, you have to side with me. And Dana makes clear in no uncertain terms that if I remain neutral, I become the tepid, fearful, unmanly academic, who steps gingerly and mouse-like through my days. In other words, this is a no-win situation. The move I want to make is much more simple— "listen, Dana, I know you're still a virgin, and in your overexcited state this seems very serious to you. If you would kindly give me access to your body parts, I would disabuse you of the notion that anything can be resolved through yapping the way you're doing. Yapping is no substitute for physical intimacy, which tends to smooth out the physical tensions that so dominate your speech, movements, and mien." But of course, Dana could never handle this. So I decided to be a pissant and do all three things at once— side with Dana, and the DJ, and also make a pass. I would do these through canny verbal manipulations the likes of which Dana had never seen. But guess what? I had forgotten this; Dana was actually working, and was merely on break. When the tirade was over, and before I was able to get off much of a response, she was back behind the counter serving fraps. She did, however, make clear that she expects an answer, when she contrives to take another break.

I didn't give her the chance. The usual lunch rush showed up at noon and I sauntered out. As I walked down South Street, I realized that however many hokey contrivances Dana pulls, I've started to have feelings for her. This is a weakness, almost entirely based on Dana's complete innocence and alluring appearance. Moreover, her sick, diseased mind makes her a good candidate for eventual lobotomy. But the human heart is difficult to control, and in a time of Depression it longs unutterably to touch something or someone. I still can't believe there's a drugstore where Tower Records used to be. As I made a valiant attempt at self-diagnosis, it occurred to me that my need is not to create an appearance, but to forge a reality. The feelings for Dana are still small, and can easily be expunged; the craving is just to feel something for someone. One of the infinite cruelties of 2010 is that it has sapped people's emotional reserves to the extent that what's left between people is confusion, selfishness,

detritus, and casual manipulation. That's the level Dana is playing at, and me with her. Is there a chance I could elevate things to such an extent that some modicum of genuine soulfulness could erupt between us? I look inside myself, and realize that the whole thing involves taking a big risk; giving my heart to an adolescent, who can and does have no idea what to do with it. Then, there is the issue of the DJ, how to make amends if I am able to run off with Dana. I have to be scrupulous; it appears to be a sham relationship, but I don't know if it is. Am I projecting my own destitution onto these café types? Is the writer capable of a patriarchal "knowing best"? Can I still tie my shoes?

Peace,

Adam

Percy,

The last thing I need is for Reed to get in on this act. Here's my diagnosis of Reed: the man needs, always, to maintain a position as the center of attention wherever he goes. So he does these dramatic gestures, like standing up next to his table while working on his laptop, to give the impression of super-dynamism, of the artist inspired. He is, to be fair, actually composing music. If his new tastes are any indication, he's moving away from standardized, vaguely hip jazz-rock, with some Beat spoken word stuff mixed in, towards straightforward jazz. He likes to present himself as occupying a position at the center of a vital nexus of musicians, who look up to him the way that, for example, early Coltrane looked up to Miles. As I have no way of verifying this, time will tell to what extent Reed happens to be telling the truth. But in any case, somehow Reed has fished around and found out all the tawdry little Grind secrets hidden behind the coffee cups and bagels. He knows that some kind of bizarre love triangle is forming between myself, Dana and her DJ, and he wants in. He wants us to be bonded as two artists together, valiantly struggling for acceptance, love, and the pleasure that is our due. As he asks me a series of questions, all insinuating, I realize it might be to my advantage to confide, or at least present the appearance of being confidential. If I appear to be lining up guys on all sides, it makes a formidable counterbalance to the solidarity of the DJs. The whole thing crumbles, however, when Reed begins to talk of Dana in caressing terms, inadvertently spilling the beans on his true motivation. This all happened today with Dana very much not there, as rain spattered Thirteenth Street and I wondered if things could possibly get any drearier. On the other hand, Reed seems willing to bring me in on his act, for which there might be substantial perks. The big perk is that Reed has female friends in the arts, as he puts it, so, in the interest of not putting all my eggs in one basket, I may follow him here and there. I also get the feeling that I can maneuver Reed away from Dana. My strategy in this is simply to point out the truth: Dana needs to feel like the big cheese where the arts are concerned at the Grind. If you are a customer and an artist, you become her underling. Reed, of course, has a difficult time accepting any kind of underling role, and all his little flourishes are meant to demonstrate and then consolidate dominance. He actively limits the time I'm allowed to talk about my books and all their lovely accoutrements, and if I go off half-cocked about what nebbishes the other poets are, he discourages me. He's one of these guys with an affected egalitarian sensibility where the arts are concerned: "we're all in this together, it's all good." Well, no it's not, and if I'd taken that attitude at any juncture I wouldn't be where I am today. In any case, as I'm writing I realize that the jury is still out on Reed.

A few other regulars have started to give me the eye. The most frustrating are the girls that come in maybe once a month, and you realize you've seen them before but it doesn't strike you until you leave that it's at the Grind. If they make eyes, but happen (as is usually the case) to be with their friends, nothing much can transpire; you're left holding wilted flowers you might've given them. In any case, there's a Depression on, and my expectations are growing more reasonable every day. What I expect most is that a sense of rationing will enter all of our lives, and not just about love and sex. We will ration ourselves food, money, emotional support, sleep, daily work-loads, development

of talents, and everything else, and it will be done with a dissatisfied frown. I'm just deeply grateful that this turn of events is occurring in my thirties, rather than my twenties: firstly, because now I'm mature enough to handle it; secondly, because I've amassed enough experience on different levels that I feel I've lived enough, I don't feel shortchanged. I can watch the soft and hard parades go by knowing that I've participated in almost every one, and that I've lived my life to the full. My dominant mood doesn't even involve the Grind that much; it's just the sense that individual human lives are slaves to the Zeitgeist, and mine is no different. For every hour on Dana, there are two at least semi-peaceful ones of rumination, and *raw time* again.

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

Dana and I just had a rather amusing conversation. Dana walks in, dressed as she usually is, in a huff; casts her eyes around the room; when they light on mine, ambles over and sits down next to me. What followed is verbatim:

“Adam, you have no idea how hard this is for me. I really don’t know how to say this. Something has to be done. When (DJ) comes in, I want you to tell him it’s over between us. I can’t take his bullshit anymore. I’m tired of all the fights and all the drama over nothing. Can you, please, do this for me?”

OK, I thought, here we are. As usual, Dana is pushing things to the breaking point, and in such a way that it puts me in the most awkward possible situation. But I had to think fast, and I remembered my own resolution to play three sides at once: hers, DJ’s, and my own. After a deliberate sip of my gradually warming iced coffee, I said, “OK, Dana, but you need to know a few things about me first. I don’t like to interfere with other people’s business, because I dislike people who interfere in mine. I hope you have expressed your feelings to (DJ) because he deserves to hear at least a few things from your own mouth. If I do this, I expect to be paid back in some way. It doesn’t matter how, you just need to show me you appreciate this, because what you’re doing is an imposition.”

Dana rolled her eyes, settled on someone behind me. It was (DJ) himself, who for whatever reason (and I know damn well what the reason was), walked straight past the Grind. Dana said, “Well, listen, Adam, I can’t promise anything. It’s just that I trust you in a way that I don’t trust any of the other guys here. You saw, he just walked past because he sees us together and he’s scared of you. I know he’ll be back, so I’m going to leave. When he shows up, please tell him what I told you.” With this, Dana stood up and in a flourish whooshed her hair out on both sides. She apparently felt that this hair-whoosh was equivalent to giving a child (me) a candy cane on Christmas. As she flounced out the door, I realized that there’s no way I can do what she asks. I’m too old to be involved in a drama better served by sixteen-year-olds who haven’t even picked up their Learner’s Permits yet.

So, here I am, waiting for (DJ) to show up. Wouldn’t you know it; here he is...

Predictably, I botched my attempt to follow Dana’s instructions. I just said to this guy (who’s now working behind the counter), “Dude, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Is this about Dana?”

“Yeah, it is. But I’m not going to play both sides. All I want to say is that Dana wants to talk with you, she thinks there might have to be some changes and...”

“Why don’t you fuck off! No one here likes you anyway! All you fuckin’ Ivy League snobs are the same! Besides, you just want her like all the guys here want her and you’re in the same position we’re in. Just fuck off and leave me alone. I’ll take care of Dana myself.”

So, here I am, back at the table scrawling these notes. As irritating as (DJ) is, he has a good point. I sometimes forget that this whole place is convulsed with desire for Dana. The irony is that everyone wants her not only for her looks but for her innocence. She’s a synecdoche for what’s missing in Philly, in America, in the world. The conflict is that she’s accustomed herself to abusing her position. It’s taking a minor toll on me, a heavy toll on these guys. After all, there are plenty of levels here that I’m not in on. The DJs drink together most nights, play the same parties, do the same business. I’m a literary outsider who shows up for a few hours every day and writes. But I’ve

got enough looks consonance so that Dana's become interested in my wares. Of course, the whole encounter with (DJ) has left me with nothing to tell Dana. I may just join the fracas and start making things up. My whole life I've resisted the temptation to dissemble; now may be just the time to join the ranks of the perfidious. My hunger has increased, not merely for Dana but for the Grind, for what it is. It is a hot-house of different kinds of desire filtered through the lens of an unforgiving era in an unforgiving country, state, and city. And, to the extent that we all go hog-wild trying to get Dana into bed, and (as I am guessing) all without success, it will be seen that in our mutual desperation, we may catch hold of something that will lay bear the true burden of examined humanity when everything becomes derelict.

Yours,

Adam

John,

Well, the situation with Dana has certainly boiled over, but in such a way that it has not spilled out of the context of the Grind. That is, it has happened all right here at the Grind, and in full view of Kris, Gary, and a few others. It seems providential to me that it was Gary, of all the Fugazi Fighters, who should witness this, and that he should be so clearly stoned. Marijuana consciousness, at its best, adds a celestial tinge to everything. As for Kris, I've never seen her more aroused. Female friendships can go one of two ways— toward totalized and consuming competitiveness, or towards sisterly bonding so pervasively deep it eclipses the notion of singularity. Kris and Dana lean heavily towards the latter. But back to the particulars of the situation, which smack so heavily of junior high that I am somewhat embarrassed to relate them— when I walked in (out of a heavy rain, it happens, and soaked), Kris was working alone. I was grateful, because it turns out that I needed to bring Eliot into a scholarly piece I'm working on, so that I laid out on my table the Four Quartets and a neat stack of printed articles. After an hour's work (I thought I'd need more, but I didn't), I ventured out into the raw wetness to smoke a Pall Mall. Here came Dana, with a portfolio bag slung over her shoulder, in an incongruous flower-print sun-dress (white, pink, girlish). Her look, as she approached me, was bug-eyed, as though she'd never seen a poet take a long drag before. We exchanged nods, and as she passed me I thought that's curious, you'd think this situation would propel us out of catatonia. When I trooped back in a minute later, I noticed that Dana had pulled a daring move— she was sitting at my table, leafing through one of my Eliot articles. Kris was watching us with voracious eyes; Gary was plumbing the depths of inner space. Was Ionesco passing on Pine Street?

Dana was the first to speak, and made abundantly clear that this was to be a monologue, meant to convey a fulsome sense of purpose: "Alright, Adam, we've been beating around the bush. I have to tell you how I feel about things. I don't want to get you upset about this, but I still have feelings for (DJ). That doesn't mean I don't have feelings for you too. I'm going through one of those confused periods, when everything just sort of gets tossed in the air. You're one of the things that's been tossed in the air. I don't know if you realize how hard this is for me. I hate putting guys in this position. But I know you'll understand because you're so much older, and I do think you know *some* things I don't." She had reached over and put her hand on my forearm in the middle of this, and I felt myself begin to stand on end. But I also knew she required a response, so I said, "I understand; I know how confused you feel. All I want you to know is, I'm not gonna try to force you to do anything. Whatever we do will be whatever you want." I was careful not to mention (DJ), because I knew, at this delicate moment, that she'd be looking (probably subconsciously) for signs of weakness. The miracle transpired: Dana loudly and pointedly asked me to adjourn with her to the basement pantry the staff use as a hang-out space. Others, who may have been sent by various parties to watch, glowered. However, I had the sinking feeling in my guts that this, not whatever was going to happen in the pantry, was going to be the climax of this encounter. *Le Belle Dame Sans Merci*, right?

Sure enough, after she flicked the pantry light on and placed her portfolio against the closed black door, Dana turned doleful. She said she knew her art wasn't any good. As I looked at her photos and drawings, I realized two things— that everyone upstairs thought we were hooking up (and I did think I'd at least get something), and that Dana was adamant about creating this impression without delivering any goods. In other words, that I'd been hoodwinked. I pointed out to her the

photos especially that I thought showed some promise, but I was too authoritative and Dana was listless. Nevertheless, we had to stay down here a certain amount of time to create the correct impression. I decided to be risqué (this is what we came for, isn't it?) and make a move (Dana was standing next to me, with her work spread out on a picnic table), so I put my hand on the back of her neck. We both knew instantly that this would be the token move that would signify, in faux-synecdochic fashion, the hook-up. A ten-count and she slithered away. But it would be necessary to come upstairs with a certain glow and neither of us knew how to attain it. The post hook-up glow cannot be faked. Would there be a second token? Dana, thinking quickly, burst into tears, threw her arms around my neck in a classic semi-Platonic bear-hug. Now, she seemed to think, we'll have our glow. We did, and Dana appeared appropriately post-coital as she got ready to work. I realized, with horror, that I might wind up replicating this experience with Kris. Despite my superior pretensions, these girls are turning me into a dope. Trish would convulse.

Awaiting the next move,

Adam

George,

Dana is working behind the counter now, in pigtails. There has been no attempt, today, to replicate yesterday's spectacle. Girls these days seem to live intensely in moments— but small amounts of time wash these moments away. In any case, I'm chuffed because all my other projects are bustling along. These days I find myself working more efficiently with foreign editors, because most American editors have no taste and no discernment. Everything's the same, to an American mind, which cauterizes away whatever refinement might develop in texts, images, etc. Here's one of the artists (or is he a journalist?) I forgot to mention: Phil, thirty-something, short, swarthy, with a slow, deliberate gait, always in sandals, always (if I'm not just being paranoid) trying to chip a piece off of me. Sure enough, he seats himself two tables down (I'm sitting outside, it's gorgeous September) and immediately begins eye games. The last interaction I had with Phil was particularly brutal— he held up an article in one of the weekly free shit-rags about poetry that didn't include me, as if to say, hey, buster, I've got your number. I waved it off, because I am of the opinion that the way the Philly press shows appreciation for genuine artists is by ignoring them. Anyway, Phil's got a cream cheese bagel and coffee, but now someone has sat down between us, rendering his eye games moot. The woman who just sat down behind me is a friend of (DJ)'s, someone I've spoken with before. I forget her name. She happens to be both semi-attractive and semi-into the arts...there, I've done the social bit and exchanged a few words. It seems to me that everything she said was a lie. She's forgotten my name...she has a boyfriend twenty years older who's an established painter...they're going to a party tonight in Doylestown...she looks forward to the "parlor games" she's been promised. Do the slice-and-dice with her postures and gestures and they don't add up— the half-smiles that dissolve into frowns, stumbles over extemporized sentences, sense that eye contact would be too much, lead to an inescapable conclusion. Of course, no sooner does she see this than Dana comes bounding outside to smoke a cigarette. Dana, for once, tries to impress us with an interest in *my* projects; so I tell her about the Collected, the articles people have published about me, and tears come to her eyes (tears of jealousy, it seems, sans any hint of generosity). So I find myself between two unwilling girls who couldn't hate my guts more. But Dana has to keep up appearances (we just hooked up yesterday), so she attempts to keep composure and demonstrate the requisite interest. On days like this, the Grind really does seem putrid to me, a filthy repository. Phil appears to be looking over and editing something. At least they have the Stones ("Paint It, Black") blaring over the sound system.

In a strange way, situations like this are what I love most about Philly. The idiocy in Philly is nothing if not perfectly consistent. A genuine artist in Philly *always* gets treated like garbage, is always unappreciated, can never create anything to the taste of the poseurs and the half-assed. There is something truly comforting about the mediocrity of Philly; a homey, settled-in feel. It takes years to learn how the system is rigged— but once you learn the system, you realize (with a shudder of relief) that it never changes. You never have to worry that someone will walk up and give you a compliment, or will compliment you in the wrong way. In fact, you never have to worry about anything; you can maintain absolute privacy. The charm and spell of the mediocre is that it never poses a threat. Dana is "curating" the Grind, and a few other coffeehouses; in Philly, the chances that she will graduate out of this role are slim. Philly is a milieu in which things establish themselves, and then just sit. As Philadelphians act out an ethos of stagnation, they provide a foil for the working artist intent on

development. What's priceless about the stagnation in Philly today is precisely its' perfection— no one moves, no one stirs. There's a sense of Zen to it. A national malaise is overlaid on Philly's malaise; Philly conforms to national standards, and adds some embellishments (a strain of vengeful celibacy, minds full of tautologies). *We are what we are*, say the Philadelphians, and even if the sentence lacks the particularized individualism of Popeye's famous exclamation, it carries the weight of deep pride and belief. That *what we are* is garbage wouldn't phase the average Philadelphian— garbage, just by being close to the earth, is right at the heart of things. The garbage, unspeakable as it is, being the stuff of life...even if the other, celestial Philadelphia, the realer one, is one I know too.

Awaiting Eternity,
Adam

Percy,

The Grind has a strange policy with bums. For some reason, they are not only tolerated but encouraged to hang around outside. Today has been particularly gruesome— a white, middle -aged bum with shit-stained pants has been hounding girls for an hour. It's useless to ask the DJs to flush these guys out— they're too spineless. As the outside tables are not cordoned off, a bum like this can get right in anyone's face or even sit down. Sure enough, the guy sits down at the next table. He moans and groans, calls the girls beautiful, scratches his ass, and generally ups the tension knob a few notches. It's Labor Day, coincidentally, and semi-crowded (I was expecting desolation). I just ran into a friend of Bennie Holmes, one of the street poets. The conversation petered out after an awkward minute. What this guy can't stand is that I've *changed*— I don't give off cozy mediocrity vibes anymore. This guy resembles the landlord in Big Lebowski, but I don't know if he does dance routines. Suddenly, here comes Dana, and I'll end this off with ellipses until she leaves...that's the longest conversation I've ever had with her. Now that we're a semi-item, she appears to be opening up. Dana has a lot of pent-up rages, for the simple reason, I believe, that she never gets laid. She spent several weeks in New Hampshire this summer, farming, and she tells me all about the thrills and spills of the organic life. She sees herself eventually living on a farm, in some sort of communal context. Funny: I spent some communal time in New Hampshire, too, on a poetry farm, and, as I'm not ashamed to admit, on a proverbial sex farm, with Wendy Smith. Dana is so scared of such things that I might say something about my own life that there are surprisingly few pauses in her rambling monologue. I nod, laugh when I'm expected to laugh, express the requisite affection. But the conversation is tainted by the evident rider that I'm not allowed to speak. Dana reminds me of N, too: the absolute despotism of the orgasmic ecstasy of the mind-fuck.

It's taken me, actually, thirty-four years to fully realize what a charnel ground the arts are. The charnel ground is established and held in place by millions of folks whose major talent is for self-deception— their guiding premise being that they *can do this*, where the arts are concerned. Layer after layer of self-deception develops, if these people stay in the arts over a long term. Because the success ratio in the arts is astronomically low, these "pseuds" contrive any number of reasons to place themselves right on the proverbial mountain. Dana is a perfect synecdoche— it's useless to try and dissuade her from believing that her little pictures are as good as anyone else's. And what density! All these levels and layers of self-deception are so tightly packed (perhaps because the self is packaged as a commodity) that to talk to these people is to spit into the wind. Being young is no guarantee of malleability— girls like Dana learn all sorts of self-preservation methods (whether it's theory, mistrust of theory, ignorance or knowledge) that ensure maximum density by age twenty-five. The guy that was just here, Bennie's friend, is a typical example— his platform is an exaggerated American egalitarianism,

an ethos that dictates “nothing’s better than anything else;” which means, of course, that his own putrid pieces are safe, fine. It also means there’s no reason to respect me as his superior. No taste means no waste, as far as he’s concerned; if everyone’s equal, everyone can serve (and, if they’re unctuous enough, be served by) him. Some of his gossip has gotten back to me, too. One of the hokey contrivances around modern poetry involves age; specifically, that poets under the age of forty cannot be taken particularly seriously. This is a gambit on the part of older, conventionally established (i.e. impotent) poets to protect their glass-housed positions. This guy, Benny’s friend, turned forty two years back. Since then, it’s been his delight to deign every move I make the foolish (albeit cutely foolish) misstep of a “younger poet.” If you spend enough years publishing garbage, if you’re still in the game at forty, you too can gloat and treasure easy superiority over anyone younger than you. Taste makes waste, except I’ve won enough leverage to cut him off if I want, and I do. Kill or be killed, schmuck, as Bill would say. The smarmy stance before the world of the book parasite. That the good guy has to win some of the time: why the rake and ho routine had to happen between Wendy and I.

The sex difference between Dana and I makes these issues trickier; genuine sexual tension makes it difficult to be disinterested, and vicious. Where there is an edge of wanting, razors become butter knives, especially with a man like myself, who aspires to kindness. But, from old writers right through to Dana, the angle of the would-be (or could-be or should-be) holds true. Do I desire vengeance? In this context, vengeance and truth are identical. Philly, this Philly really is such a putrid mess that a claim for vengeance (or truth) would be an overstatement— all I covet is a few moments rest— Larsen’s dope. Which was a hit down on the farm in New Hampshire, I might add.

Yours,

The Eternal One

George,

I am overhearing Tibby talk to one of his fiction-writing friends on his cell-phone. The subject of his phone-call is “falls from grace”— who’s fallen, who hasn’t. In literature, there are any number of ways to fall— you can publish the wrong things at the wrong time, be too famous or not famous enough, shoot too many arrows at too many moving targets or forget to defend yourself. Tibby happens to be discussing the arrow-shooters; guys who create toxic social contexts and destroy themselves in the process. Ironically, this is precisely how I perceive Tibby. “With guys like this, you just have to walk away,” he says. Tibby, as usual, projects onto other artists what he doesn’t want to see in himself; but I see Tibby’s projection as representative of a larger problem. To put the matter bluntly, artists in 2010 America have largely gone Republican, owing to the subconscious influence of one Dick Cheney (pants-wearer) and his jack George W. Bush. The Republican syndrome in American artists manifests in two ways: 1) an inability to see art in any but the most crassly competitive terms, and 2) a complete and totalized unwillingness to change on any level. This widely manifested syndrome has turned the arts, willy-nilly, into a charnel ground; a damned, God-forsaken locale. The cruel irony is that a majority of artists (like Tibby) consider themselves to be liberal. It’s a generation sickness that spans three generations; and it makes mince-meat of any American “ideals” that artists could think to propagate. Heather Mullen’s nightmare. Tibby and I do small-talk, and the subtext never changes; he pretends to know less about myself and my work than he actually does. His biz is parasitic and voyeuristic. Yawn.

I just had to repel a kind of attack. A tall, thin, balding guy in his (I’m guessing) fifties with a moustache and a plethora of arm-tattoos invited himself to sit down at my table and smoke a cigarette. I put him off by telling him I’m “working.” I am, and part of my work is digging through the “Fall Arts” issue of one of the weekly free shit-rags. I’m stunned: there’s no literature in this at all. It’s all theater, painting, pop music. Philly is, after all, a fiercely illiterate city. People here pride themselves on what (and how much) they *don’t* know. And here comes Tibby again, and it looks like he’s got big news. It is this: one of his friends (an NYC guy) scored a movie deal with his latest opus. Of course, this is something I have no chance of competing with. Tibby presents the data to me as a *fait accompli*, but I know that most movie deals fall through. Tibby’s two objectives: to fill up his accustomed vacuum of hollow space (he’s not writing, scrounging, wife preggers) and to make me feel as small and worthless as possible. If I have an objective, it’s only to gather anecdotes towards a comprehensive summary of human foibles. I’m willing to be complicit with Tibby: I flinch at apropos moments. Tibby, incidentally, carries his body like a befuddled twelve-year-old forced to carry six feet and one-hundred seventy pounds. His wardrobe evinces hipsterism reduced to bare essentials— faded blue-jeans, tight tee-shirt. His speech conveys the know-it-all assurance of burgeoning adolescence. In other words, he’s a man-child. The DJs aren’t that different; immaturity, after all, fuels the cheap competitiveness and totalized stasis that have made a

charnel ground of this place, too. Interactions like this used to shake me; but when you begin to look beyond yourself, they become easier to bear. For the real players, there are even interesting levels to self-absorption—you are absorbed in yourself, while also engaged in acts of self-transcendence. In this mode, you can get past button-pushing and see into the life of things. Tibby thinks that writing a novel is just pushing buttons—here’s something that looks symbolic, something that seems penetrating, something with “universal resonance.” He’s a show-off, fishing for praise. Vast, mighty, ephemeral careers have been built from button-pushing. Real literature erupts when an artist starts to fumble—Audrey Cope said that. It’s fun to do these arabesques while waiting to see if Dana eventually shows up (I still don’t have her cell number). Sometimes I feel like tossing my entire enterprise aside just to gawk at the sky. The Grind could use a little sky in it.

Well, Dana finally showed up alright. She was a little off-kilter, a little askew, and also a little mischievous. A bunch of whispered conversations ensued, and, from a gesture Kris made, I sussed what the point must’ve been—Dana is coyly leading everyone who needs to know to believe that she just gave one of the DJs a blowjob. Sigh. Am I a little tender, about this stuff? Yeah. Julie Hayes once claimed to have given twenty guys blowjobs over the course of one summer. Guys who will never eat, I trust, desert mushrooms again. Yikes. Well, get over it. She probably just sold him some dope. Who knows? I hope she really did it. Once again, I do the yeoman’s task of walking in the park, dancing in the dark, and reminiscing. To me (I say, to the assembled throng of 19th century bards), Heather Mullen (her again) was always the quintessential Master of Disaster (MOD) around fellatio; was, in fact, a High Mod. She thus displayed mastery of craft-skills related to fellatio and emotional dispossession, streams of consciousness, skewered perspectives, not to mention an artful sense of fracturing. It remains to be seen, I incise spitefully, if Dana displays such mastery. Inbuilt also, for Ms. Mullen: the deconstructive impulse, the definitive conviction that “there is nothing outside the sex.” That’s the thesis of *Equations*, anyway, right? Not to mention Reception Velocity, like on the Internet. The irony of the High Mod girl; she sucks.

Deep in my own desert mushroom trance, I can’t not hit Trish again. Killer instincts aside, Trish’s hardcore fellatio Romanticism was about an ideal, a belief; that we were two souls interlocked, moving through our private and privatized universe together. Sincerely. And she was wildly lyrical, orally. She found me mad, bad, and dangerous to blow; but it worked. The music was electric. Trish was Psyche, she was Helen, she was Penelope. Not to mention Venus, Athena, Maud Gonne, Fanny Brawne. And Traci Lords. Phantasmagoric, in a way that Heather Mullen could never be; but short, as it were on irony. Dana Blasconi need not apply.

Sky-Clad,

Adam

George,

I'm not waiting on a lady; I'm just waiting on a friend. It's a guy I met about six years ago, during the days and nights of street-prowling and bar-hopping. He's played in a bunch of bands (guitar, of course), all undistinguished, and now makes a modest living as some kind of contractor. Before they became engaged, I almost had it off with his wife, too, a good-looking dirty -blonde with green eyes who now works as a guidance counselor at an urban high school. This guy, Chip, is two years my senior; balding, with a big brown beard; average height, average weight. I can sense from a mile away what the subtext of the conversation will be; Chip's as proudly "Philly" as anyone I know; he'll want to contrive a way to talk about anything *but* my art, a way which renders me moot, and mute. He'll want to reminisce about the 90s (we were both there, we both saw them); talk politics; or pursue the accustomed routine of guiding me through his latest, soon-to-be defunct musical project. I'm here because it's a beautiful day, and it's the Grind; and because Dana has been coming on strong again. She now blabs about other guys she's been "seeing," in obvious bids to pique my jealousy. It's astonishing to me that I've known Dana Blasconi for four full years without having moved passed the initial flirtation stages. What's crucial to Dana is that we *look* as though we've slept together. Oh, how could I forget; the DJ that's been following Dana around got axed. Apparently, they couldn't take his furious tirades anymore. He still comes in as a customer, and glowers at me. To be honest, I felt more comfortable with him as an employee. Now, he can instigate a physical quarrel if he so desires. Yawn. One other thing I forgot to mention about Chip: he, also, is prone to fits of physical violence. It was at the Grind, actually, six years ago, when I sat outside with her and discussed places we could go to fornicate. She wanted to do it in an elevator, but the whole thing got derailed, I can't remember how. If that day had panned out the way we wanted it to, Chip and her wouldn't be married today. Skirmishes like this aside, I don't miss street-life that much. The way Philly functions, street characters ossify over a period of years to the extent that they lead frozen lives: frozen around an image, a mode of behavior, a static context. Chip and Donna at least make enough money to have transcended the street. Larsen can't get out.

Speaking of which— and this one is authentically for the ages— were Trish and Tob ever authentically "street"? Could they keep up, for example, with Mr. Rind and Mr. Severin, not to mention Bill Rosenblum? In a manner of speaking, yes and no. Trish won't do bars, Tob will, if forced, which she often is— but neither of them can hold their booze. Trish disintegrates into Diana Hunter-ish ranting, raving, and skittish tantrum-like upset, while at least maintaining the conceit that a wiser modern-day Cassandra never lived. Everything she prophesies will come to be the truth, after a few glasses of wine. Wine, she feels, makes her oracle routine more solid. Tob disintegrates into a fearful realm, conversely, of total paranoia, born of having been raised in backstabbing Manhattan. Everyone's out to get her, everyone's plotting against her, and did you say something about her behind her back? Did you? Yet, to

their credit on the “street” ledger sheet, they both smoke dope like pros. You can get domestic with them over a spliff, a bowl, or even a bong, and have a decent (or better) time of it. To get that dope, the rudiments of “street” would have to have been in place, and they were—even if the mysteries of bar-life, and of moving around the street chess board in bars (John Rind being a king on the board, Christopher and myself merely knights) were not known to them. Chip, btw, resented John’s king assignation, the freedom it granted him. Phoenixville is always holding in resentment; John would throw him a few party favors and shut him up.

Actually, it doesn’t look like old Chip is going to show up. This has been happening to me with some frequency lately; old friends initiate contact, and then break off engagements. Maybe it’s because they’re intimidated, or maybe they’re scared off for some other reason, or just preoccupied. In any case, it’s no skin off of my back; I’d rather see Donna, frankly, as she’s a prime file (possible passion crimes aside) in my “unfinished business” drawer, pardon the sleaze. Do genuine artists often arouse (pretty extreme) ambivalence? I am, of course, asking the most grandiose rogue in the history of the English language, so...Tibby’s baby, I now know (from the usual sources) has been had; I’m not sure I’ll ever see him again. Tibby’s proved to all of us (and unequivocally) that he’s an adult; after all, to have a child is to achieve Ultimate Adulthood. Or, to be angled towards obsolescence. Right, Trish? Here’s Chip: it’s Phoenixville time.

Yours Childlessly,

Adam

George,

Strange dream last night. I was in bed all over again, in my apartment. I awoke, in the dream, to find Jena Strayner crawling across the floor, not far from the bed, as though she were a caterpillar. Only, she was a brunette this time, and didn't look older than ten years old. Her face remained unchanged. I asked her what she was doing here. She slithered backwards slightly, propped herself up on her elbows, looked me dead in the face, and said, "Because you are my husband, I am eternally damned." The feeling in the air was charged with menace. I felt something issue from her head, land next to the couch. It was a kind of whirligig— a congeries of raw consciousness data to fall into, veering off into the insanity of perceived damnation. I had an ESP moment, and knew that she was anticipating her death, in her mind's eye. But because she was ten years old, a brunette, and a caterpillar, all the menace-n-macabre crap in the air was charged also, with a tinge of the absurd. The sting of it was that when I woke, I did feel a strange energy in the apartment, a sense of the whirligig being real. I did live through my share of macabre moments with Ms. Strayner. What could be more macabre than room 510 of the Atherton Hilton? Or up-all-night in a trailer in Liverpool, Harrisburg 'burbs?

In waking news: with Dana now flaunting the guy she's seeing, I'm left to scope out other diversions. One is Kris, who I've finally been able to establish contact with. While she was unchaining her bike today, I managed to talk to her about a pertinent issue— the Grind no longer has a permit to allow outside seating. This means that we have to drag chairs from inside outside, on the few warm sparkling autumn days we have left. Today is one. Kris, up close, is vastly more sardonic (and shrewish) than Dana is. With her voluptuous proportions, she actually reminds me a little of Liz Taylor in *Taming of the Shrew*. The difference is that Shakespeare's Kate has no real sense of irony; Kris does. Kris has in her eyes that knowingness which says, quite plainly, *once I've seen you with your pants off, I own you; once I own you, you become so magnificently ridiculous that you're to be held in my back pocket (nowhere else) interminably*. If you want to call Dana and Kris the Doublemint Twins, Kris is certainly the more sinister of the two twins. What redeems her is honesty. Dana's veneer of niceness is always holding her back, especially considering how transparent it is. Kris just scoffs and rolls her eyes. Salt on the surface.

One thing that is worth saying about Dana Blasconi: she comes from country stock, but she is by no means a typical country girl. True country girls always err towards the timid, the meek. They lack gumption, nerve in general. For Dana Blasconi to begin in the sticks, and wind up kicking serious ass (hokey contrivances and all), as she does here at the Grind in Center City Philly, bespeaks unusual courage, and an equally unusually robust sense of self. Dana didn't settle for the country deal at all. I can't not link her in my mind to Jena Strayner, who superficially partook of country life, all its lack of amenities. Jumping into a shotgun marriage which included all kinds of pornography-worthy sex, with the damned degenerate who happens to be writing this missive, was about raw courage, country values be damned. Jena Strayner belonged in Center

City Philly as much as Dana does. Just as Dana belongs...anyway, both of them earn, for whatever it's worth, kudos from me about what it means to rebel fruitfully in the world, whatever stump-dumb aegis you happen to begin under. By staking a big claim on living a big life, however much I criticize them in my writing (this applies more to Dana), criticism will always be tempered by warmth and admiration.

By the way, Chip did finally show up today. We got, unfortunately, into a rather nasty argument. Chip is one of those semi-artist meatheads who insist (and it is a very American position) that an artist should be judged by the size of his or her audience. So, Bruce Springsteen becomes better than Beethoven, Allen Ginsberg superior to John Keats, and the Abstract Expressionists ride high over Goya. Chip even goes far enough to say that Bruce rivals Ludwig in musical complexity. I hit him with every imaginable jab — what art is to me (which has, built into, layers of snobbery which I embrace), what constitutes cultural hierarchies that actually work (over centuries), why America has seldom been taken seriously by world artists (and Larsen). I know, of course, what the subtext of Chip's argument is— *I'm every bit the artist you are, and my opinions matter as much as yours*. Well, no they don't. At the crucial, culminating moment, I revealed to Chip that 1) he is not an artist, 2) he's not even as good as I am at playing rock music, 3) his opinions on the arts, particularly the higher arts, are all hokey contrivances that are by no means commensurate with mine (I did lay it on thick). He got up abruptly (we were sitting outside), told me he'd never talk to me again, and drove off. I saw the man clearly, as I never had before; behind all his thought, the imperative to compete (on all levels and in all ways); the presumption of equality (misapplied to a realm in which there is no equality); and the philistinism that informs both post-modern art and rock music. America, Larsen says: more freedom, but among kiddies.

There's an anti-climactic feel to the Grind these days. Little dramas develop, coalesce, sputter into nothing. Tensions play themselves out on subterranean levels. People don't say too much, and what they say often amounts to a series of non sequiters. Also, the simple (but very painful) truth: I miss being young. My body of work sits on my back like Baudelaire's chimera. It also takes the form of a long-suffering mistress, requiring sorely needed, seldom received attention. But lovers and friends and contexts also create bodies of work, and at a certain saturation point you find yourself gazing blankly at a pile of bodies. To the extent that I can tolerate the sensation, I take my scalpel to the distempered parts of all these bodies, including my own. I can do dish about all this human stuff, but then art levels squish into it and the whole thing becomes a palpitating mess. I made the choice as a young man to surround myself with artists; this is surely my just dessert. Blue icing? Sometimes. But at least as hearty as Trish's eight thousand ways to do rice-and-vegetables.

Sauteed,
Adam

John,

When the action at the Grind slows to a standstill, it's easy to fall back on a pastime that brings to mind not only Baudelaire but the charm of an unseen Paris: people watching. I've had to face it: many of the old crowd have fucked off and split. To the extent that you can still walk in and find a DJ behind the counter (and hear, like thunder, the jagged edge of a Gary Numan record), not much has changed. But this is a period of transition, and as certain tides turn I wonder who I'll ever see again. There's a young couple sitting two tables down; probably U of Arts students. Her hair is dyed fire-engine red; she wears a zebra-striped sweat-shirt, and keeps directing flirtatious glances my way. He's in flannel, and from his lisp and accents I'm not sure if he's gay. Their legs aren't touching; a good sign, if I decide to do my Peter Pan routine. But I have mixed feelings about the old moves. Jadedness has very much become an issue. This is especially true because the reigning American ideology prescribes two things to those under forty— 1) if you're not in a relationship, you need to be in one 2) finding a relationship can be approached like a business project or venture, and things will fall into place if you take the proper steps. Having been as-much-as-married three times, and not rating the production of children as a ticket to Ultimate Adulthood, the whole scene falls down in many bits for me.

Do I feel like Faust half the time? I do. What would become of Faust in Philly? To the extent that Goethe is not one of my dead masters, it is difficult for me to guess. I do know that I've made my peace with Philly, and have some fondness for it. The essence of the Philly sensibility is extreme naïve cynicism— saying no to things you don't understand. This cynicism isn't intelligent enough to play games or experienced enough to recognize nuance. It is almost entirely unearned, and reliably change-resistant. Once you've mastered it, it becomes as comforting as unaffected friendliness. Philly is, indeed, a city you can rely on.

My heart bleeds for the kids walking around today. I get the feeling that many of the U of Arts students I see here not only have not made their peace with different parts of the American ideology, but try to reject its presumptuousness and crass competitiveness only to have authority figures throw it back into their faces again. Philly is a hell of a town to learn about the arts in, and during a Recession, when the political landscape is dotted with mirages, landmines, and lava spills, not only can the arts not be *proven*, nothing else can, either. These kids, unlike the old-timers (and old-timers here means anyone older than twenty-five), are earning their cynicism; they understand too much, rather than not enough. And they're happy to piss away hours on their i-phones, when they could be making solid connections. But perhaps what they've learned is that human connections, in 2010, are not particularly solid. Maybe I shouldn't be jaded (am I projecting?), maybe I should believe that you can study the arts in Philly without earning any cynicism. In any case, fire-engine red is walking out with her friend, and her last glance is slow and plaintive. I return it, thinking that she can't be Gretchen if she's 70% of a Faust herself to begin with. But the last rumination I have is more placid: just the way she looks, the delicacy of her form, the tender eyes, can be taken in and appreciated as evidence that what crosses our path can be as redemptive as we let it be (for a romantic).

Faithfully,
Adam

John,

Being in this place on an almost daily basis, my moods come up and down with the music they play. Today seems to be 90s nostalgia day: we're sitting through *Bleach*. Listening to Kurt's voice, I travel inwardly to the place I inhabited when I first heard these songs. The teenage landscape: how much I wanted to be an artist, how many privileges I claimed for myself because I was already writing songs, and all the stuff that happened on the periphery of my consciousness (though perhaps at the forefront of everyone else's): parties, driving around with friends, pot, girls. One thing I've lost is a sense of expectancy—as of today, I have nothing to look forward to. It's not just that experience destroys innocence; the road of excess I've been joyriding down has created a space around me that cannot be filled. But I catch backwards glimpses sometimes, and music, more than anything else, opens up long-closed channels that allow me to re-receive impressions. Right around the time Kurt died, probably late spring '94, I was hanging out with Kev and Fran at Fran's house, high. It was trippy weed and, sitting on Fran's back porch, I hallucinated that his backyard was an African jungle. I was self-conscious because I had to piss and thought I couldn't find the bathroom. So, this being the 90s, I just walked into the jungle and pissed there. My last memory of that night is of banging out one of my songs on Fran's piano, specifically for Kev to hear. I realized in the middle that I have a unique talent—though I often couldn't find my feet when stoned, I could bash out my songs and get through them. The sting kicks in—here I am, at the Grind, 2010, having both gained and lost more than I ever thought I could. All because, maim me or not, when I say “art” I still mean it.

There's a man sitting in one of the corner seats who appears to do (outlandish as it seems) cartoons for the New Yorker. In the early aughts, I was quite smitten with the New Yorker, down to being a perpetual subscriber. It took me several years to realize how “culture-lite” it is. It doesn't aid their lightweight image that the most likely place to find the new New Yorker is in a doctor's or dentist's waiting room. I loved Updike in those days, and I still like bits of the Rabbit books, but the poetry is so putrid I really only pick up the New Yorker for laughs. Why a New Yorker cartoonist would plant himself at the Grind in Philly is beyond me. Maybe he likes the European feel of the place—black coffered ceiling, semi-artsy photographs, hipster consonance. There he is, rubbing one off. Nicer than Bleecker, eh?

One trail I go down on days like this is opening my eyes to visuals, as ends in themselves. Sometimes I get a weird visionary sense just from looking at murals, row houses, cars, sunlight hitting certain kinds of bricks. For instance, the way the sun just now is striking the façade of Frank's puts my head in a painterly space. I've always admired the expansiveness of certain painters' lives—Picasso, Monet, Renoir. The real painters, it seems to me, have a way of taking it easy while maintaining intensity. There is a terrible narrowness to language in any one writer's hands; images have a pliability that makes them seem to me, on some level, more blessed. Not that poor old Monet going blind isn't tragic; but the length of his life, the broad vista of his painterly consciousness, is something that can be picked up, even if Frank's is hardly a realm of pointillist precision and water lilies. Or maybe there is a hint of desperation in Philly these days, and I'm channeling it.

Yours,

Adam

George,

Lazy Sunday here at the Grind; an unusually mild October day, too. Dana is working behind the counter, and now that we've given up on each other I can drink my coffee in peace. One of the tasks I've assigned myself is to allow space for introspection. Just so I don't have to chain myself to a strange present and an uncertain future, the "backwards glance under the assurance of recorded history" has become appealing to me. I've never quite got over the impression that this is literature's essential task: the past. To the extent that "time present" is contained there, I think of autumns in my late teens, in which I had no other task (almost) than to daydream a glamorous future. What is glamour? It's romance, enchantment, magic, charm: the future. Are glamour and literature rigged to be antagonists? There is past glamour (which has consonance with literature) and future glamour (simultaneously more real and more specious). In those days, I would get adrenaline rushes just from writing, and was disciplined enough to write for a certain number of hours each day. I taught myself discipline, if nothing else. But what I remember most about those days (and it isn't glamorous) is the sense of attachment I had to people and circumstances. It wasn't just that I wanted companionship, love, and affection: I needed it. It's been a long road to turning reptile. And the final bridge to cross was not acceptance or acknowledgement, but sacrifice. I was in a dorm in those days, and from my third-floor room I used to look down on kids shooting hoops after dark (the court lights stayed on until 10). I was wired tautly enough that I perceived threats on all sides, but (fortunately) also graced with an inherent obliviousness. My roommate (this is '94-95) was a well-meaning redneck who went home weekends. One of the amusing aspects of that year were the stories he'd tell of me of Pennsylvantucky— nine-foot albinos who lived in the woods, crows nailed to trees by Satanic cults, redneck guys who go through "fat and happy" phases wherein the consumption of a dozen hot-dogs is not unusual. He was also the first guy to play me Iron Maiden. How I basked, then, in the travails of the Demon Seed.

Even then, there were wedges I used to keep distance, even from my friends and girlfriends. The most frequently employed independence gambit was one specific self-schema— "I'm an artist. This grants me certain inalienable rights, one of which is to scoff at my underling pretenders." Living as I did, in the "artist's dorm," where almost everyone could bash out a few tunes and at least knew the Beats, I had to keep this pretense (a true pretense, but a pretense all the same) up at all times. As the years went by and I integrated myself into different contexts, that foundational schema never changed. Because I began writing substantial songs and poems at a young age, I never suffered too much doubt. But my big fated tryst at the time were the drama kids. I saw that undergrads could have their plays produced in the theater department by theater majors and I went nuts. I had no safety net of experience, as I had in other realms; I had no idea how to write plays. So I started from scratch. What's unforgettable to me is how much anxiety I felt among the theater majors. In certain ways, I was very set and rigid— "I'm an artist, I make art." I learned that people who seriously (or not seriously) devote themselves to theater have a more fluid, unbounded manner of perceiving themselves. Their pretense (and it is deceptively simple) is that they *act*. Though I had acted in high school (and even did a Carnegie Mellon pre-college program for drama), I was raw enough to be shocked all over again, especially as I was a philosophy major at the time. My rock friends

couldn't stand them. But that was the beginning of a courtship that took many years to consummate. And it might've looked glamorous to someone else, but it didn't feel glamorous to me. Glamour is evanescent—it blinks on and off. And I morphed into James Dean just before I left that town. Ha!

Fond Regards,

Adam

George,

There was, indeed, glamour to those days. Part of the glamour was just the general ambience of the 90s; the sense of being safely ensconced in a womb-like time. Everything was taken care of, the outside world didn't have to impinge too much on one's daily life. If the loneliness of being a young artist was crushing at times, I was buoyed by a sense that there was yet time to make things work out. As far as my involvement with the theater kids went, things didn't really take off until I met a guy named Clarence, who was one year ahead of me and a big ace in the theater department. He was tall, broad, and blonde, with a somewhat sinister air and a sense of command. He was also substantially talented, both as an actor and as a playwright, so it was easy for me to pay him the necessary compliments. My first play was produced (they were, admittedly, all one acts) on my twenty-first birthday. Unfortunately, I was having a nervous breakdown and didn't go. Cruelly, many of the younger theater majors who didn't know me thought that Clarence had written the play and I didn't exist. The play was a black comedy concerning a possessive mother with witch-like powers stealing a boyfriend from her daughter. There were cheap lines and it wasn't particularly artsy. By the time the next was produced, Clarence had almost left town. This one was also rather cheap, not worth discussing, and rather a bomb. But I learned an important theater lesson— what goes over in rehearsals doesn't necessarily go over before an audience. The rehearsals were riotous. The final two stuck more. One was a concept piece that tried to incorporate some Dada elements. I included all kinds of hokey contrivances, and no real narrative structure. It was a reasonable success. By this time, I had integrated myself well enough into theater circles to begin attending their parties. Because I smoked pot and drank, I could make a show of not being boring. But they were a nut I could never fully crack, because I wasn't one of them. Me and a few of the girls were in love from a distance. When I moved to New York, I left them a final script to produce, and they did produce it in the spring of '99. Talk about embarrassment— I was a waiter in New York at the time. One night, I served a couple who told me how much they enjoyed the final piece. It was a set of interwoven poems, with enough narrative action to satisfy an audience. I've never seen the majority of the theater kids since.

And all this relates to now for a few reasons. I still have high hopes for Clarence, who's in New York. The other reason is that I'm looking for some tension and dynamism to enter my life. I ask myself if I'm just too old to throw myself into new contexts, and I don't know the answer. If there is glamour in innocence or experience, I have glamour in experience— past glamour, literature glamour. But I can't go into full-on Byron mode, because there is still a part of me that wants something from life. The folks here at the Grind are still enveloped in visions of youth— there is no one less venerable than a DJ. And, to the extent that the Fugazi Fighters are on tour and Tibby is watching the baby, there aren't many figures here to measure myself against; particularly because these guys slander me behind my back and don't have the nerve to do it to my face. Welcome to Philly. I'm an outsider here, and always have been. I've always, actually, been an outsider almost everywhere. But I'm not done with introspection yet, and one thing I've neglected to mention is that group formations, like the theater kids, have always been a kind of undoing for old stand-alone me.

Yours, Adam

George,

An old acquaintance of mine is sitting a few tables down. She was getting her PhD then, I don't know what she's doing now. She finds many shorthand ways of saying she hates my guts; she's frozen, rigid, and when I attempt to make eye contact she demurs. Having spent years among academics, I know that I've finally achieved enough outward success that I'm difficult to ignore. But I've achieved this as an artist, not as a scholar. There are key differences— scholars go to such elaborate lengths to avoid direct statement that they make an art out of convoluted evasion. An artist, at times, will actually say things plainly. A critic is, I suppose, situated somewhere between an artist and a scholar. This woman has tidy yet baroque ambitions. But as there would be no literary scholars without artists, I have the one-up on her. She's not bad looking, blonde, slightly overweight, hair in a librarian's bun. The guy she's talking to is somewhat obese, another academic, and making a show of being a good guy. He wants to fuck her and there's no chance. There's no chance for me either (and I would), for the opposite reason. It's a miserable day in Philly; too warm for late October, humid, and wet, sodden fallen leaves sticking to my sneakers. A pregnant woman is eating a sandwich next to me, with one of her friends. Pregnant women turn me on, I'm not sure why. It may be that my body is reminded of its biological imperative. People these days are having children later and later. She looks mid-thirties, my age. I will admit this— it hurts to not have enough money to raise a child. Tibby doesn't either, and it hasn't stopped him. James Joyce raised kids on nothing. I have another old friend who's about to have a kid. This guy was, in fact, an aspiring novelist. He wanted to be Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer. He fetishizes his Jewishness out of proportion, and his family, who told him in no uncertain terms that literature was a waste of time. It is, for most of the human race. And for this bloke, whose fantasies of Bellow-hood were rather severely impeded by a life spent sequestered in two tight family units (his and his wife's) and a circle of life-long, all Jewish friends, literature, just by opening his mind up, became more or less a nightmare. A nightmare, I might add, with no compensations— it has cast a pall on his whole little life, so that he sees and appreciates his extreme tininess. Because the guy could've been good, I can't have too much sympathy for him.

It took me into my thirties to realize that the arts are full of guys (and girls) like this, who are too held in place by family structures to bust out and make a real mark. What is the telos for family structures? To safely encompass the individual and mark him round with girders; to set limits, to demarcate personal space. The problem for artists with family structures is that they make demands which impinge, not only on the creative process but on the psychology which allows creativity to develop over a long period of time. It's an artist's cliché— marriage and kids finishes things off. Throw suburbs into the equation and you've got a noose about to hang. Religious affiliations aren't much better; another noose. As an artist, if your life is ten lambs you will have to sacrifice nine. The final lamb is golden.

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

The DJs are all here today. They appear to be having some kind of conference. It's funny for me to watch these guys, and realize all over again a home truth about the human race: most people don't change much. These guys were doing the same thing ten years ago; the same circles, clubs, types of girl. The levels of change are subtle, but they're there— a sense of well-worn connection, deteriorating often into ennui, balanced by awareness that the current recession is decimating the music business. For some reason, the Grind is trending towards 70s progressive rock— what's playing is ELP or King Crimson. Maybe it's the impinging autumn. Nostalgia has clearly become relevant to these guys during the recession, as it has for me: once innocence is authoritatively conquered by experience, backward glances have to substitute for freshness. But in my romanticism (that wishes to be more naïve than it is), I always have the fallacious thought that the next big romance will enable deliverance; from time, history, old mythologies and ethos. When I met Trish, this happened— the shrewd angles she had on things (how to live, pass time, ascend past the mundane) felt relevant enough to cause, not only a sea-change but a complete rebirth. Is my life marked by enough luck for lightning to strike twice?

The DJs are going out for a smoke, and I'm going (for once) to join them. I can only talk to these guys about a few things, so I did. Turns out they're importing a bunch of British bands to play their shows (which aren't always just them spinning records). When we talk, we always part with the same stalemated silence; they can't end with hype because they know I'm not coming to see them, so they degenerate into sullenness while I drift back inside. Stay in a city long enough and these interactions become unavoidable— connections become abraded, loose ties unwind into nothing, routines congeal until there is no healthy ferment. Conversely, I love these guys because we've mastered each other. Who gives a shit about books, they might say, and be 75% right. Not all reciprocity has to be positive to be comforting. Long-held antagonisms do affirm one's existence, and the perversity of treasuring these antagonisms is uniquely Philadelphian. Poe (probably not Whitman) might've loved Philadelphia for the same reason. A city with Scorpio rising.

The photographs they have hanging in the Grind just now (this is considered more or less a viable art space) are also uniquely Philadelphian. They're grotesque— a fat guy with Down's syndrome in a Spiderman tee-shirt, a poor kid running around a water-spouting fire-hydrant. The idea is just to hold a mirror up to Philly and show it for what it is. My style is the antithesis to this— to so utterly transcend Philly that I raise these festering streets and their often imbecilic inhabitants to Shakespearean heights. I've never gotten over what the Philly streets are like at night. It's an expression of duality— surface layers of quietude, serenity, and intermittent darkness, with dread, violence, intoxication and death underneath. New York puts everything on the surface; the whole tone of D.C. is too officious; Chicago has pockets like Andersonville that aren't all that different; and (from what I've heard) you can't generalize about L.A. But Philly at night has an ambience that I've never seen anywhere else. Having been held up at gun-point, I'm not particularly innocent about it either.

Defensively, Adam

George,

Occasionally I see people here that I know, to some extent, from ten years ago, and who I no longer remember precisely. A thirty-something brunette, in glasses and wearing multiple rings, just walked in with what looks to me like a friend (black, nerdy, also thirty-something), and made a pointed remark about readings she used to do here. The only reading I ever saw at the Grind was one of the Free School group, who mounted the counter with a microphone and did Beat-style riffs while someone I don't remember plonked away at a Yamaha. The charm of Philly art productions— the foreknowledge that they must, of necessity, be hokey contrivances, derivative of material already derivative to begin with. Whatever artists present themselves must demonstrate pride in their feeble amateurishness, and the downward mobility of all things be celebrated. That downward mobility can be seductive is a lesson I could only have learned (in the thoroughgoing way I learned it) in Philly. These two are, I have gathered, adjuncts, and the guy teaches at a community college. When universities (and marginal entities like community colleges) have readings and reading series, everything's rigged— professors arrange for their students to come to fill seats, adjuncts and graduate students are encouraged to show up to make connections and hone their social skills, curious administration members drift in. Knowing all the ins and outs of these things, it's amusing to listen to this guy's boasts. As there is no real public for literature these days, bringing in "really amazing people" means bringing in writers who publish in the highest possible places. I'm no slouch, but as far as conventional media and hierarchies inherent in them (Norton, Houghton Mifflin, all the top anti-indie publishers), I'm a wash-out. But print publishing is about as healthy as a landed fish, and the Net is enough. Is it enough for these two? Including some of the university press stuff I've done, probably. But they seem to be dancing around using any names, and I wonder if it is because of my presence.

I have got a little fame buzz going. It's only interesting to the extent that being an art celebrity forces people to reveal themselves in unusual ways. Like the clique of theorists in the South who asked me to head their little movement, centered on one piece I published that did a noticeable amount of damage. They came to me at different times looking for an *answer*, but I couldn't decipher what the question was. And the girl out there somewhere who made a "minecraft" video for one of my poems. But these are scraps, and I couldn't care less. Keats described fame as a wayward girl, and if that's all she is, I'll wait for her to amble over into my garden. Like Dana. I dwell in the realm of half-fame. Philly's reaction to any kind of fame is hilarious; Philadelphians bury their heads in the sand and doggedly press forward, determined not to notice that any distinction has been achieved. With books, that's easy. And because Philly resents the arts, the average guy on the street (who may or may not know who I am) finds it an imposition to have to look at me. The fact that I still have good looks heightens the tension, so that I have received precious little in acknowledgement from anyone here. It all works for me because, as I've said before, it's predictable. Philadelphians treat movie stars and famous politicians the same way. That doggedness will now have a place in the history of English literature, and that tremendous cowardice which lingers beneath also: a big Dark Lady.

Yours, Adam

Percy,

Here's an angle: everyone in America in 2010 is looking for a cheap buzz; I am too. But people are wary of addictions, and this era appears to be all about sticking to the straight and narrow. So what do we do? I found, hidden in a drawer, two drowsy formula cold pills, and I popped them. So, here I am at the Grind, floating in a little daisy glaze. I was much better at being stoned in public when I was younger; in fact, I was very proud of the stunts I pulled off when stoned. I could attend classes, get haircuts, host poetry readings, even go out to dinner with Trish and her parents with a buzz on. I bragged then that I had good luck with drugs, and I did. The shiniest jewel in my crown was New York, and I pulled off things there I wouldn't even consider trying now. For one two-month period in the spring of '99, I lived on a diet of black and white cookies, pot, and Vivarin. I could get from Tribeca to the East Village to the Upper West Side, all stoned and often alone. I was recording an album at the time, and I used to sneak into bathrooms to finish off whatever weed I had. I remember that between takes I would often collapse into a stupor. But I blew surprisingly few takes, and I also got around without major incident. The closest I came to disaster was on a building site (temporarily abandoned) not far from Washington Square Park. I was writing poetry and intermittently taking hits from my bowl. A cop suddenly came through one of the partitions, but (I'm guessing) because I looked so young, innocent, and vulnerable, he ignored the smell and let me off scot free. All through my twenties, especially in Philly, I had a sense of being protected, of being held in a womb-like space, when stoned. Occasionally I'd even "wake and bake" for days at a time. The veneer of peacefulness that pervades Philly's streets seduced me completely. It's one of Philadelphia's bizarre contradictions— what looks repulsive at a distance can be seductive up close. To the extent that Philly will never be a city of pleasure, it's not a strain to believe, on a sunny day in summer and with a buzz going, that the place not only has short-lived charms but continuous attractions.

Poor Dana: she's putting on a lot of weight really fast, and having a hard time making any kind of living. With all her frigidity, there's no beau around to lean on. I, personally, believe that her newfangled food addiction is just an expression of repressed sexuality. The funny dynamic is that she knows she could have me (or any number of different guys), but an inner compulsion won't let her relax enough to open up. The absurd syndrome is that sex has become outdated and outmoded for this generation of girls, born in the 80s. There must be some causal connection between this syndrome and Internet porn, but I'm not sure what it is. One of the fliers on the wall advertises a literary event titled "Revenge." I take a closer look— it's one of the Free School guys. Without wishing to be a megalomaniac, I wonder if this "revenge" is against me. This is another guy who hasn't changed much— conducts his literary life as though losing were winning, surrounds himself with kids he can boss around, has the furious, requisite Philly defensiveness. If his "revenge" is, indeed, angled in my direction, I certainly don't feel piqued. It would be more shrewd of him to contrive some kind of set-up. But the Philly mentality is so blunt and so simple, and its hypocrisies so blatantly obvious, that the idea of playing Iago would never cross a Philly artist's mind.

Yours, Adam

John,

On a day to day basis, more and more artists, semi-artists, and pseudo-artists are migrating to the Grind. Sitting not too far away, a group of three intent on being theater impresarios. They're talking funds and grants. Having never received a grant, I have nothing to contribute to their conversation. I do know this: as the years go by, I get more impatient with the material demands of daily life. It's enough to make me desire some kind of permanent grant, just for one less thing to worry about. I'm already gnawed at by impatience—the sense (call it the Faust sense) that there's nothing left to experience. Being monied would at least be different. The gratuitousness of temporality—you use up resources, reserves, but even if it's done wisely there are still days, weeks, months, years left to fill. Wordsworth spent forty-three years spinning his wheels; the rest of you lot got out early. The problem with the human race is that it derives most of its sustenance from illusions. The great suburban illusion I grew up with is that one should take steps to secure the longest possible life. Don't drink, smoke, take drugs, or engage in promiscuous sex, so that you endure to achieve a ripe old age. Quality of time takes a not particularly close second to quantity. I've noticed something else—that you can extend a worthless and meaningless existence as long as you want, without altering its essential vacuity. It may be more intelligent, spiritually, to get in and get out. Not that I can't imagine living to a ripe old age: it's possible. But I refuse to abandon my pack-a-day habit to an ethos that aligns prudence with emptiness. And, where the female race is concerned, I can be taken by force, stealth, or stratagem. Most human endurance is shallow endurance. I've seen married couples discover, in extreme old age, that they don't know the first thing about each other.

Then, there's the intensity and dedication that can be brought to language. Linguists tell us there are an infinite number of potential sentences. Language, itself, is infinite. But because language is the expression of necessities (i.e. we communicate what we need to communicate), if there's no need to speak or write, nothing should be spoken or written. As I follow line with line, another silence is covered over. There was no need for poor Wordsworth, after 1807, to lead a bitter life. But because he couldn't shut up, he did. Fame, also, has sunk to nothingness for me; love hasn't. Does love involve anything but humiliating intimacy? I'm not convinced it does. Someone like Dana never thinks of death (or love), but of shortcuts to material prosperity. I feel the weight of her emptiness more than she does. She misses, as Trish and others didn't, what a penis might be worth.

I'll admit: I waver, about intimacy. Actually, I recently spent a (not particularly physical) night with a Wiccan lady, and she laid down an intimacy gauntlet I wasn't expecting her to. She admitted that the following insight was post-Wiccan, too. The basic purport is this: if a man sleeps with a woman, and shoots a load into her, that's it. That's Mother Nature's marriage insignia. They are then man and wife. It's the apogee of intimacy. It can't be porn, and it can't be a prostitute—any level of professionalization, and the spell is broken. But that's how a real

marriage manifests in the world. There can't be a condom...the mind reels. Refusing to do a Julio Iglesias routine in text here, I nonetheless know who my wives are, if post-Wiccan is taken to be as legitimate as, say, post-modern. Kate! And poor Dana, who must kick the asses she kicks in the world from a dry place, unlike Jena Strayner. The real, raw thing, like raw time. The likes of which is not orgasming now, to be real, as I'm getting bored with all these shenanigans.

Hung,

Adam

John,

The “Revenge” girl is sitting halfway across the Grind. She’s reading a large tome that I don’t recognize. Funny thing about her; before I was the enemy, I couldn’t meet her; once, sitting outside, she was sitting facing me and I tried. She appeared to be catatonic. Writers, I have noticed, are often socially defunct. I could sit staring fixedly at this girl (she is, I’m guessing, early twenties) for an hour, and she would force herself not to react. That’s another level of Philly consciousness: complete cynicism augmented by debilitating cowardice. If I haven’t become completely cynical in response, it’s because Philly’s complexes offer compensations. I don’t have to worry about “Revenge” girl actually taking substantial revenge, whereas in New York or L.A. I might actually get crucified. I also don’t have to worry that she’s a literary threat— she’s already fallen into an underling circle from which there is no easy escape. Dealing with Philly artists is like dealing with mannequins— peaceful work, even if the subtext crammed beneath the surface is hatred (or revenge).

The Grind is packed, and they have *Transformer* playing over the PA. I decided to vote today, just to thwart my own intuitions about American party politics. The first intuition is that the two-party system no longer works. The second is that unless someone forcibly changes things, the current discontented stasis will be interminable. Between these two intuitions is the sense that feelings of individual empowerment are at an all-time low. I not only don’t feel politically empowered, I had to hold an internal debate as to whether or not to vote. The two parties are maintained in a plutocratic manner, and America itself is (or has become) a plutocracy. Since the two parties, as Chomsky says, are not all that different, what constitutes effective action on an individual basis? But I bit the bullet and voted Democrat as usual. There was a gas station near the neighborhood where I grew up that used to hang a banner which read “if you don’t vote, don’t complain.” Reverse this and you have “if you vote, you can complain.” And then comes the pivotal question— if you complain, who listens? If the answer is no one, what’s the point of voting? The evidence points to the fact that those turning real political wheels do not, in fact, listen to individual complaints, so the whole common morality angle crumbles almost instantly. Which leads to another intriguing Philly angle: this is one of the most resolutely Democratic cities in the country. For all their knavishness, Philadelphians are as bullish about voting liberal as they are about anything else. So on a day like this, I do feel some solidarity with those around me. Where political consciousness is concerned, I’m as static as I can be; I’ve been thinking the same thoughts since I was eighteen.

On a more mundane level, Kris has dyed her hair black. But she’s shying away from Goth apparel to do the straightforward indie thing. We’re now officially on speaking terms— one of us has to up the ante. “Revenge” is scribbling in a notebook, and I notice something new about her— she’s wearing a ring shaped like an owl’s head. The owl’s eyes are faux rubies. Is this a fashion miss? As I get ready to pick up and move on, I realize I made some faulty fashion decisions in my twenties, too. Mesh shirts, dog collars, Celtic crosses, polyester; I was always going around in circles. “Revenge” may not realize that two hundred years ago, the owl was a symbol for death. And, as not everyone realizes, the owl is a rather stupid bird.

Yours,
Adam

John,

I have to say, in all fairness to the rest of Philly, that the Grind is starting to take on a sacred aura for me. Maybe it's because I've come to understand something small-town folks know— you can only penetrate a place (even a small place, even a coffee shop) over a long period of time. If there is a “mystical Philly” for me, it's centered here. And it's just because the place has bits of Europe in it (coffered ceiling, antique lamps), bits of New York (flier-plastered walls, hip music), making it a unique composite. It's also interesting to me that some days I'm incapable of cold objectivity— however naïve my romanticism is, I get drawn into it by a native laziness which is accrued to my consciousness. When I balance imperatives, sometimes a lazy one wins. Or perhaps I just like this place.

The most important memory I have of the Grind is writing “Wittgenstein's Song” here in 2005. It was a sunny day, late spring, and I was sitting outside. The whole process was nonchalant, took about fifteen minutes. Once I got the first rhyme (catch/match), the thing flowed rather freely. The rest of the day was not so easy. I called my friend Larsen, who had a recording studio set up in his apartment at 13th and Carpenter. I dropped by, just to say hi. There was industrial music blasting from the speakers, of the kind Larsen was making at the time, and a pair of girls sleeping in each other's arms on the floor. Curious, I thought, and failed to put two and two together. I smoked some of Larsen's weed with him, hung out for a while, and left. Within an hour, I was manifesting all kinds of flu symptoms. The stuff had been dusted. I only vaguely remembered that I had written a poem, and discovered it the following day in my notebook. Larsen had, in those days, a longstanding habit of getting me in trouble with his drugs. The last time this happened was about two years ago, when one day I smoked a J with Larsen and found myself on some kind of LSD trip. By this time, I was only doing bits of things. Larsen's still around. A few weeks ago, he called me for advice on some installation art piece he was doing. He wanted reference points— I gave him Jeff Koons and Richard Serra, two artists I used to have some fondness for, before I achieved Enlightenment.

Thinking about this, I realize there are many things I've lost since 2005. I can't be reckless the way I used to be, or carefree, or promiscuous, or spontaneous. Maturation processes in artists are strange, and idiosyncratic; but I've become established as a (currently low-level) academic; I don't have the option of being strange, or idiosyncratic. For all that artists and academics traditionally feel uncomfortable around each other, poets don't seem to have much of a choice these days. If you get a foot in the door, as I have, you have to follow through, unless you also have a trust-fund. Whenever I run through this series of thoughts, I always think of how much of Balzac's novels are just about money. Why isn't there more poetry about money? Why are the generic boundaries so rigid?

Yours,
Adam

John,

Boy, does Dana squawk these days. There is something positively bird-like about her, as she flaps behind the counter, fetching this or that. Her voice carries to both ends of the Grind, so that I am being jolted every few seconds. As our anti-romance plays itself out, I find her perpetual near-irritation almost comforting. In other news, a Professor just entered who I know from a few years back, and sat down next to me. One semester, I had a temp-like gig working down the hall from his office. Some days (it was a one day a week gig) I was reduced to fliering in the English department and elsewhere. There was another woman working in this wing, about five years older than me, with a reddish bowl cut and lots of west coast affiliations. She bought copies of two of my books, and I thought of asking her out or making a move in her direction. It was strange: from the week after I sold her the books forward, she wouldn't talk to me, averted her eyes. I always thought it was because the books had overt sexual content, which she found outré. Those Fridays were also memorable because I was blogging about the election. All those posts were the work of a political novice and I later had to delete them. Liberal America greeted the election with a collective hallelujah, but the elation was short lived. Too many calamitous seeds had been planted over too long a time. I don't even know what this Prof. teaches, but I keep waiting (and defensiveness is not unknown to me) for him to try and chip a few bits off of me. Bit-chipping is not only an academic pasttime, it is the lynchpin that binds academia together. Low-ranking academic that I am, I have what every professional American wants: an *angle*. My angle is my art, and because I have made more or less successful gambits with it, even on crass American levels I can consider myself a success. Not that I see no deficits in my position—there are too many hierarchies endemic to human life to be on top of all of them—but there is a sweetness to have a claim on status as an artist strong enough to move myself around on the board because of it.

The days grow shorter and, as was the case last year, there is an expanding sense of comfort and magic in the air. Part of it is just the transformation my apartment undergoes—when I pull the blinds down but leave them open, what in spring and summer is a necessary but mediocre view (the blinds trap heat) becomes something noir enough to make me feel myself in a properly dramatic setting. There is also the somewhat misplaced feeling that I am in Los Angeles (belied, of course, by the temperature), and that I can set up camp in the golden glow of a cocaine buzz. My apartment is better in cold weather. And when I think of where events are leading me, it is always towards another romance. Thirty-four years and a bunch of degrees have not eclipsed this longing, craven as it is held to be for intellectuals, for whom no flesh is a shibboleth. Relevantly, Dana just left, and our faces were almost pressed together by a throng who came in at once. While I'm past the point of considering Dana, the buzz is nice.

Yours,
Adam

John,

It's a bit soggy for an autumn day, not particularly crisp; a mood of impending celebration hovers over the dreary Philly streets, perhaps only for me. I keep getting e-mails from the scum-rock guys I grew up with, culturally, and little invites. While I don't subscribe to the notion that you are the company you keep, these scum-rockers are always looking for an excuse to throw things (including me) away. They think amateurishness precedes dominion; time has taught me otherwise. I always, in the early days, made the supposition that these guys were going towards something, on the move. I've learned that it isn't the case— they work from a core of pure stasis (if there is such a thing). Incidentally, the scum-rockers hate the Fugazi Fighters and vice versa. The Fugazi Fighters at least *try*— they may not transcend the Philly trash ethos, but the will to do so is present. It makes talking to Gary, in particular, difficult. Nice guy that he is, he maintains the illusion that he and his compadres have done it, that they're the rock equivalent of me. It's just that no one outside of Philly realizes it yet. But the scum-rockers are pigs in shit. That I started out with them is a not particularly exquisite accident.

The DJs are loading on the ELO, and the ambience of the Grind is timeless enough that I can almost pretend it's 1978. It's a game I used to play as a kid— to close my eyes and pretend it's another year, another time. These days when I do it, it's Regency England, and I'm a Lord. I see myself standing in some kind of procession, on a grand set of steps leading up to a wide balcony; in some kind of changing or fitting room; at a long dining table sequestered in a nook in a mansion with, among others, one George Gordon in attendance; and (bizarrely) tumbling in a drunken frenzy from Buckingham Palace. Industrialization then was like digitalization now, but with fewer advantages for artists— industrial consciousness being about order, digital about chaos. When I come to from these visions, "it's a livin' thing," and I have to deal with the utter lack of resplendence which defines my current lot. As my mind scopes out objects, I notice a couple sitting across from me, whispering in confidential tones. They're middle-aged, and seem out of place. I can't help but feel sorry for their half-assed gestures, little perky grins, air of the somewhat monied. After all, that's how I was raised. It's strange how money works with generations— looking back, I can never quite tell whose friends' parents were or were not trust-funders. I also know these matters are seldom discussed by anyone. Despite American crass competitiveness and presumptuousness, no one wants to look useless, and inheritance has its ignominious aspects. I do stand to inherit a good amount of money someday, but I don't care much. All I would do right now with extra money is buy apartments in a few other cities— Chicago, New York. Mobility is pricey, and priceless. Throw a wife and kids into the bargain, and obviously the entire equation changes. While I look forward to fatherhood, the harsh reality subsists— the human race doesn't need more babies.

Yours,
Adam

John,

Surprisingly, it's early (10 a.m.) and the Grind is packed. It's a miscellaneous crowd, and I've been forced to take a corner seat. I've stopped smoking, just randomly. Not everyone can do this, but I was in the bath last night and decided. I didn't start in earnest until seven years ago, November 2003, the month I broke up with Trish for the first time. I was finishing my degree at Penn at the time, and standing outside Bennett Hall with a gaggle of fellow travelers, it clicked that I wanted to smoke perpetually. In all honesty, I can't say my experiences over the last seven years have been enlivened by cigarettes. Is an evanescent addiction even an addiction? But cigarettes are a good social lubricant if you want to bond with degenerates, and a pain in the ass if you're staying with prudes.

The way the day is structured, I have to wait all day to teach. Late afternoon classes are a drag, and at thirty-four most of these students are little more than half my age. Some of the girls give me sex vibes, and, after certain semesters, I have slept with students before. Oh, the days Julie used to follow me here, the torment, temptation. Truth be told, I haven't done anything seriously transgressive since. This semester has generated no stalkers, only a crew of bashful adolescents who might well wish to do me to secure their grades. One, in particular, was in my office doing our conference and began hyperventilating. But I share my office, the risk is too great, and I actually do have some ethical standards. The interesting thing to me about these kids is how little passion they have. Unless pushed, they make only minimal responses to my queries. I was different at eighteen— a twisted ball of raw energy. My first semester in State College, I got a sense of my own twistedness for the first time. All these normal, football-loving kids over here; me, hell bent on being a great rock artist, over there, and full of exaggerated pretenses contingent on songs I'd already written. It was not only culture shock; I felt reduced to a defensive position all the time, especially when the guys on my floor decided to stage a mutiny against my songwriting. I was extremely disciplined, and never let anyone stop me. First semesters at American universities are always nuts— everyone's in and out of new groups and contexts all the time. Kathy was my early trophy, a cute and ample blonde who I met some ridiculous way, probably playing my guitar outside. We fastened the two beds in my room together (my roommate went home weekends) and went to town. To think, that some people in 1994 actually took their studies seriously— it would take me over half a decade to get my ass in gear this way, by which time I was at Penn and had pulled off the unique trick of bettering myself. Kathy remains in my heart as the real first. She was born "to autumn," right?

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

There's an absence of familiar faces these days at the Grind. Like other contexts, especially job contexts, this place has a high turnover rate. The only consistent factor is that there are no consistent factors— crowds form, consolidate, and disintegrate with little rhyme or reason. This is a time of transition for the Grind, and for me. A few months from my thirty-fifth birthday, I think of Keats and his “posthumous existence.” Rather than being felled by TB, I am felled by my shrinking sense of mission and purpose. This shrinkage is not born of failure, but of the sense that I am contented enough with the existence I've had to feel little need to continue. I've done what I wanted to do with my life, and I have no regrets. Because I'm not particularly afraid of death (for my own peculiar reasons), there is a growing sense of indifference to what transpires on a daily basis. Behind the indifference, I've made certain judgments about the human race, what its capacities and limitations are. People pay attention to how they dress, who they sleep with, what their material possessions are— but not their thoughts. How many people have, on any level, intelligent thoughts? I think the hold we have, as a race, on “post-subjective concerns,” is tenuous. Higher education, to the extent that it reinforces mercenary concerns, doesn't help much, nor does the media, or the government. Americans most enjoy having thoughts to exert more control on different kinds of appearances. But America, for the first time in its brief history, is tired; and a tired nation that is still in its adolescence is, inevitably, going to be petulant.

I feel like an old-timer for noticing these things. This whole nexus of ideas consolidates my sense of indifference, because I can't change anything, I can only watch how the pieces fall around me. If I died today, it would be with the knowledge that every human life is brief, tiny, and contingent. Still, no one can tell me I haven't said my piece. I came along at a time when no one in poetry was writing with any real candor, and changed things. By adopting some of the dynamics of romanticism, I gave poetry the sense that having substantial roots is necessary for survival. But to be “post-subjective” about it, I'll always lament how many years I and everyone else wasted in the morass of post-modernism. One thing I've been noticing is the strange manner in which post-modernists age; as the years take their toll, they look around for human support and find none. The dryness and emotional entropy of this movement carries over into their personal lives.

Indifferent I may be, at least part of the time, but I haven't forgotten how to feel— all those Wordsworthian lessons. It could be that this is all a mirage— the calm before some storm, death before rebirth. If this is a death, there is a collective element to it— people, not just post-modernists, are closing up shop left and right. There is a sameness to tune into, amidst all the differences. And if I'm reborn, I hope it is into a new form of passion— some new feeling or impulse, that can lead me upwards onto a new level, one way or the other. But you can't second guess these things, and, for all I know, the deathly stillness may get worse before it gets better.

Yours,
Adam

George,

Oh, the lovely Philly media. They put a poetess on the cover of the City Paper this week. It appears to be some kind of expose piece. Those guys would choose a slow torturous death to writing about me. The door is most authoritatively closed. One thing I will say about Philly types— when they shut a door, it stays shut. The street poets were that way too, when I first met them. Philly abounds in immovable objects. I'm hoping that Kris, who's working now, is not an immovable object. I am now officially in flirtation mode with her. She's a bit of a hard case, actually, but not in the ostentatious way Dana is; Kris plays sphinx, not tart. And with that ski-slope nose and black shag mop, she looks rockist enough to take some knocks. The girls sitting next to me are also interesting— overweight, loud, leopard-skinned, painters starting out at U of Arts. They're still very excited about being in the big city and away from their parents, as they generate the faux intimate tones that junior artists adopt to appear confidential, experienced, adult. Much of their conversation is (or seems to be) aimed at me— not because they know me, but just owing to my looks and presence. The gay couple sitting across from me seem more suspect— I've seen them somewhere before, and one carries a "Strand" hand bag; the Strand bookstore, where I worked for three days in 1999. I walked out because the shelves were too high. Those days, I couldn't obtain satisfaction anywhere. Now, my life is more germane. Just this morning, a book was released online with a blurb from me. It's a poet I like personally, though he does have a penchant for lax Americanisms. They're using my name to enhance a commodity. I could deal with some lessons in commodity enhancement— when I do "beef up" routines with my print books (as in, figure sales angles), I always feel lost. You're buying a thousand copies of each, right, George?

Disenchanted as I am, all this points to the fact that I still have the basic human drive for acceptance and socialization; I largely crave what everyone craves. As such, to have a name that is a name is a nice thing, even when it gets torqued into an odd shape by those who use it. If Kris would lend me her body for a few months, life would be even nicer. This stunning realization of sameness comes at a cost— that "standing on a mountain" headiness that is the province of higher artists. Conversely, once sameness is established, everyone reacts to basic drives in unique ways, and the real human test, where those drives are concerned, is truthfulness. The temptation to adopt postures, to establish set criterion, exclude, divide and conquer takes the foundation of human drives and convolutes them into devils. But, willy-nilly, here I am, standing on a mountain again. Lyric poetry tries to be in medias res; but in epistolary novels that ape omniscience, forget it. To outward appearances, I'm not standing on a mountain— in fact, an American writing in a café tends to appear an idler. Yeats' "noisy set of schoolmasters" would probably put me in my place, because their mountain seems (to them) to be more substantial. But I'm a kind of schoolmaster myself, I have students, I can hold a class in the palm of my hand when I choose. As this missive falls into a potentially terminal drift, I notice that the Grind has cleared out again. I feel slightly more self-conscious than I would otherwise, and before my words turn mountainous I'll turn this one over to the master for close inspection.

Yours,

Adam

George,

Here's something proud: there is a little industry growing around my work. Several of my online editors are taking my poems and spreading them around. The Net is an Action Painting, and it's better than Pollock. Whenever another drop hits the canvas, I get an energy rush. And what's most abstract, in regards to the expressive arts, on the Net, is simple: audience. You never know who they are, or where they are. It's easy to get a handle on this when you put a link on Facebook— the only possible audience is your friends. But I'm now up to 1000 friends, most of whom I've never met and whose names I don't recall. Unless someone comments and puts a face to things, it's a faceless orgy. It occurs to me that for years the Net has been the most exciting facet of my life. TV is an idiot box; the monitor doesn't have to be. The idea of rigging the Net with solid high art not only works, it makes high art more accessible than its' ever been before.

Dana looks cute today, in a blue paisley-patterned shirt, obviously thrift-store purchased. She plays better music than the DJs— we even get to hear "Brand New Key," the ultimate female stalker song. That, and Nico singing Jackson Browne, has brightened up the morning so far. Another unusual circumstance: a DJ has seated himself next to me. He's telling one of his friends on his cell that he's taking a creative writing class, and has to come up with a short story over the next few days. Unfortunately, he seems nervous and ill at ease in my presence. I'm so used to seeing him behind the counter that its' difficult to adjust to having him sit here. Who knows, one of us might actually say something. Dana is making notes about something on the counter; now she's serving a frap to another blonde in a red sweater and blue sweatpants. I've noticed that Dana's weight keeps fluctuating— she's been from plump to gaunt and back again in the last year. I attribute it to a heavy work schedule and too many compulsive feelings. Her ersatz boyfriend just walked in, who seems, basically, to be a dummy (as I was) to make her appear sexually active. That's one of Dana's compulsive feelings: the unrest that comes from unwanted, inexperienced, frightened celibacy. The kiddies are stilted. Heather's another shit-kicker who could be of use here.

I get the sense, just for myself, that there may be some clearing in the woods soon. It's just a hunch, but all the signs point to a breakthrough. It's certainly not going to be with Dana, but I enjoy watching her squawk and flap around. Perhaps she'll grow out of her skittishness. I was skittish in my early twenties, too, but I wasn't a virgin. I squandered all kinds of opportunities, between being skittish and stoned. All this came to a head in New York, where I would often buy a twenty-bag in Washington Square Park (as has been mentioned) and where I'd often pick up girls but be too incapacitated and jittery to perform. New York is a desperate place, and I had plenty of desperate moments there, as everyone but the dumb rich do these days. The last time I was in NYC, I had a vision of apocalypse, walking around Union Square— a sense that everything was tilting, falling down a slope, all with a jerk. Prophets have said New York is doomed, and I believe it. America, being a petulant adolescent, needs a certain number of comeuppances before it can bring its' bearings to a more adult level, and a crushed New York would be a start.

Yours,
Adam

George,

Now that a little industry has been established, it's up to me to put it in motion. Scholars talk about "Byronism," a comprehensive system of literary world domination fixed in place after Childe Harold. If there is a system of "Fieledism," I have to work with my publishers to make it happen. So I do double-time, as promoter and press agent. If I found the work distasteful, I wouldn't do it. But there are fascinating levels to Web consonance, and doing promo on the Net has collateral benefits, where investigations of group psychology are concerned. You can only hit *this* group so many times with so many e-mails; *this* group you can hit anytime; *this* one is only for rare and special occasions. To manage different beasts— that is the task. This morning, I managed to post a final notice on Facebook about the Equations on i-tunes— and, now that I've been "Face-pinché," the chosen thousand has (potentially) mushroomed. Whether the text is really completed yet I don't know.

The woman sitting next to me is a regular, who I've never met. She appears to be slightly younger than me, but with some premature gray in her hair. She's doing academic work, and I sense a Penn affiliation. Not much else to say about the Grind today, other than the fact that I'm always taken aback by how difficult some kinds of relationships are these days. People (it seems to me) don't talk, don't relate, and while I can point to no glorious past, I have had feelings of freedom in relation to those around me that are in abeyance. When I first returned to Philly from NYC, I had never lived in Center City before, and I was 23. Everywhere I went I met new people. The city seemed to be teeming with characters, and I had no problems drawing them towards me. For six months, I even went so far as to become a Goth kid— leather pants, dog collar, etc. Who knew Philly could be this much of an adventure? That club on Delaware Ave. (I forget what it was called) was hellish— an industrial warehouse that had been cleared out. I could never quite keep up with the leading lights of Philly-Goth— they were rigged to function on only one level. There were so many circuits to be mastered, so many key names to remember. Eventually, I migrated from Goth to indie rock— but even then, my allegiance was pretty half-assed. Artists generally don't pledge allegiance to groups, because the price paid is too many concessions away from autonomy. The little perks you get from group allegiance are piddling. Every real king is a real individual.

What I did learn in those clubs (and bars, where the indie circuit was concerned) was the vagaries of that kind of life— the duties, obligations, and honors of the socialite. Conversations (rather than culture) become capital, and everyone you meet can be both a commodity and an investment. To the extent that I can deal with being an investment but not a commodity, I soon took off all the regalia and tried to open my own bank. It's still operative, though it's largely online these days. For me, the Net is the central investment of 2010. To the extent that the Net can be rock solid for poetry, I want to establish it that way. But if there's nothing solid in heaven or earth, it's all a toss. I think that was your thesis, wasn't it? That, and the foibles we all go so far out of our way to hide. I don't, of course, but then nobody asks me what my foibles are.

Yours,
Adam

John,

Another perk that comes with being “named” is that I get used in academic papers. A woman somewhere in the Deep South used a block quote from one of my essays in a term paper and published it online. It has to do with the lack of respect scientists have for faith. If I have any faith, it’s not in science or organized religion— it’s the simple principle of change. The dynamic of the universe is things changing, right? These days my changes are all online, and I don’t want it to be that way. Some forces of stasis are impinging on my life, and I’m set to cut them off. The Grind is turbid with stasis. Do they want me here?

One thing that is fascinating about this place is the light, the poetics of this space. On a cloudy autumn day like this, there is a drowsy ambience hanging on the high, paneled windows and the view of yellow-leaved trees on 13th Street. But the mood goes haywire with the jaunty techno music emanating from the speakers. The high ceilings, track-lighting, and fans do give the space an aesthetic dimension; even if the art they show is third-rate. The walls are Christmas, red and green; and, because there is no awning, the place is like a loose woman, penetrable. As much as a place can be loved, I am learning to love this place. This, despite the fact that an iced mocha \$4.35, and a brownie \$2.75. That, I’m guessing, is what Balzac would’ve noticed about this place. I used to buy more food here, but I’m tighter these days. And I have made some harsh judgments about myself, like this: I can never be an authentic intellectual, because most of my memories are emotional, not thoughtful. I am also incapable of envisioning a future for myself composed of thoughts. I’m too preoccupied with sex, emotions, sensations, and art. To live intensely was one of your tenets, and sensation one of your métiers— this is what I get from the Odes, and I conceive of my future in Odal terms. To the extent that authentic intellectuality entails responsibility and commitment, I am inauthentic. But I’ve done enough public intellectual labor that this might surprise a certain part of my audience, who would expect my warm parts to be frigid and vice versa. I have always felt a sense of fraudulence when confronted with self-conscious, self-fetishizing intellectuality, simply because my rages take me other places. And now that people are using me in their term papers, it’s getting worse. Oh, for the cleanliness of the objective.

On the other hand, the advantage to hard-line Paterian aestheticism is that the less your ego attaches to thoughts, the more intellectually free you are. To the extent that real freedom is hard to come by, “sensation orientation” has compensations that dilute the negativity of irresponsibility. I am now, as it happens, having a sensation because a female Temple adjunct is sitting next to me. She’s doing a conference with one of her students. For all that I sense many levels of hokey contrivance, this is a physical sensation, that cuts off cognition. I could say I never get tired of the mercilessness of human flesh, but I do. Here I am, standing on end as usual. All these little hothouse sensations get worse, not better, as I get older— innocence and experience, both in deadly guise, square off. If you can satisfy both poles at once, you win. Or, you can get left with refuse. The taste of dust and ash is familiar to me. But that April freshness, only cruel when withheld, is always alive somewhere in the world, and can create new realities, sordid or not.

Yours,
Adam

John,

Dana, she says, has “a lot on her mind,” and apparently had a difficult Saturday night. I didn’t, because I haven’t been going out much lately. Has anyone? There’s a tendency towards reclusiveness going around. Partly it’s because people are insolvent; partly it’s because people are sitting at their computers. Computers are a big reason people are insolvent; I had to put a \$300.00 charge on my Discover card this week for the Geek Squad to take a virus off of my PC. “Safe browsing” is my new motto, porn be damned. I also had a woman from the Deep South friend my on Facebook, and had an intuitive flash that she might be a relevant character for me. As “Eight Days a Week” blares over the speakers, Dana does a little dance. I don’t find the early Beatles too charming anymore; or Dana. But I have a fetish for watching women dance; and Dana is still cute enough to appear enticing here and there. This morning, I found, by chance, this blog headline— “Animal Health Foley Assistant.” I would still be gratified if Dana would condescend to be my Animal Health Foley Assistant. Where sex is concerned (and as has been mentioned), Dana’s only health is sickness. Ah, Trish, couldn’t you have kept it together a little longer?

Kris has now joined Dana; the Doublemint stars are in alignment. She’s got a yellow and red scarf and a ponytail. When the two of them work together, things get brisk; it’s fun to watch their routines. It’s always “this guy said this” and “this guy said that,” but they never have relationships or sleep with anyone (I’ve divined Kris’s celibacy too). The situation has puzzling intricacies— they work with a handful of well-known DJs who appear to be “players,” but this place is no hot-bed of hook-ups anymore. Is the Grind that much about reality? An interesting, and imperative, interrogative question: realness. The Doublemint Twins lay down a mid-level gauntlet. They really do work here, as the foundation of two genuine lives in the world. Both have overcome stifling lower-class backgrounds to find themselves among the hipster elite in the big city, at a fertile time for culture here, no less. That’s noble. But not nubile, in that they don’t put out. Trish and Tob are two monsters of well-roundedness. They do everything. They make Gloria Steinem (and Isadora Duncan) look demure. Why is it, though, that, even with dyke posturing accounted for, it seems that Tobi Simon is just a little bit more real than Trish Webber? All the extra time, especially extra nights, are on Trish’s side, but it doesn’t matter. Tobi, I can’t not notice, is always just a little more herself than Trish. She puts out, but on a limited basis; doesn’t get close to people the right way; is frighteningly paranoid sometimes; but it doesn’t matter. The essential core of Tobi Simon is about complete and totalized integrity. About integrity, Trish has lines running and deals going, and is certainly well above average, but not as unassailably perfect as Tob.

Things were looser here ten years ago; there was a sense of risk and joie de vivre that isn’t here now. When too many people have to work too hard, everyone gives off tired vibes. There are different levels of fatigue— not all of the exhaustion is physical. People with tired emotions can’t let anyone in; people with tired brains can’t think. What the DTs haven’t

discerned is that exhausting your sex parts can cure other forms of fatigue. I would be happy to teach them this lesson if they would only sign up for my course. But they're too naïve to even be in their twenties, and I'm a weathered thirty-four. I haven't lost my looks but my illusions. To the extent that I'm capable of romance, it would need to be dark-tinged. Dark-tinged glamour works, too. For a seasoned consciousness, a chiaroscuro life is desirable. We all like expansive moments, but moments when things contract are interesting too. Sometimes, when I write, things contract on truth; the deeper the truth, the more profound the darkness; but it is a penetrable darkness, with some light in it. The truth of things is chiaroscuro—that's why post-modern art has so little truth in it. It's all garish brightness with consuming darkness behind it. There are no truths that aren't blended. Most of the routines we establish in our lives are meant to expunge darkness— surface layers that don't involve spiritual labor. But the real stuff in us emerges from odd angles and at odd times— and it flickers on and off. The Eliotic complaint, that human kind cannot bear very much reality, is true only to the extent that the little glimpses we get from the shadows don't count.

Prufrock'd,

Adam

John,

It's the day before Thanksgiving, and the first really cold day of the season. Oddly, the Grind is almost full. The DJs have old Beck playing, and sometimes I have a difficult time remembering the Nineties with fondness. As I live more fully in present moments, the past means less and less to me. I've lost the ability to rose-tint my own past. When you drain away illusions, meaning and meaninglessness do a little dance, and meaning doesn't always win. Having spent a big chunk of the Nineties in a small college town, I learned that the scope of most human lives is small, and can be tawdry. What's unpleasant in my memory is the knowledge I have in retrospect of hidden depravity—of guys who hide seething resentments beneath placid small-town surfaces. These songs put me in that space again of being young and trying to curry favor with morons. Jesus loves someone, but he doesn't love State College. And the moves these guys pulled to shut me out (this is an indie rock scene I'm talking about) did sting at the time.

These days in Philly, there are other levels I notice—just the look and feel of the streets, the architecture, how some blocks are actually more expressive of harmony than others. I'd be lying if I didn't say I was sick of the people. But what is a city? Does it have to be the people, or can it be the ambience of the streets, the parks, the buildings? There are vistas to fall in love with in Philly—the purple of winter dusks on Walnut Street, from Rittenhouse walking west; even the walk east on South Street, starting from 10th, particularly during the summer months. Very few people, even Philadelphians, have made an open fetish of Philly; these days I do, just for the visionary deadness of the place. The vision of Philly deadness is all stillness, deceptive calm. That sense is alive even in West Philly slums, even in the mafia neighborhoods. Even what is unspeakably garish is instilled with a strange and electric peace. This is how my fantasies of Memphis run, too; and why I still find Big Star relevant. Mid-town Memphis seems to be, if tinier, an analogue to center-city Philly. A city can be approached like a woman, or any love object, and become a fetish like a lover. When I get to Memphis myself, I can verify (or not) my surmises. I have more of an impetus to explore Memphis than I do to explore Prague or Paris. New York, also, is all hype to me these days; despite their vast pretensions to superiority, New York has been disappointing me since I left ten years ago. You can't even do New York properly without a lot of money these days. New York was the twentieth century, and it wasn't a great century for art.

Conversely, centuries are not entities you can second-guess ten years in. I have my fantasies and fetishes just like everybody else. But the science and art of architecture, how spaces give rise to art and artists, is fascinating to me. Even if I can't share my fascination widely, developing a real interior sense of space about space is my current task. I'm in love with Philly because I *see* it in a way I never did before. It's sweet.

Yours,
Adam

John,

The proliferation of my material on the Internet has put me in a novel position. How do you build a solid literary life out of the digital? The strange angle I have is that often my mp3s seem more solid to me than conventionally published poems. I can sense that, for some reason, some people enjoy hearing my poems more than reading them. The charm of listening— it's something that hasn't been extensively explored in literature for two centuries. When poetry sucks, who wants to listen? But things are changing and the twenty-first century is going to be better than the twentieth. In any case, it was a rush to have a few new mp3s up today. One of the DJs has avant-jazz playing, for once, and the place would seem disturbingly "Beat" if people could smoke inside.

I've been thinking a lot about the twentieth century, actually— that what got produced, art-wise, was determined by an atmosphere that anathematized metaphysics. To make a long story short, the twentieth century was soulless. Who, besides Picasso, was a great art-spirit of the twentieth century? Camus and Sartre, Proust and Joyce; but the general tendency of the twentieth century was to elevate the banal, the falsely signifying, the popular. And, by the end, Picasso had been written off by the avant-gardists, and Duchamp valorized. Duchamp, whose trash ethos dictated that art be a process of expunging things. The problem with this approach is that evacuations need to be balanced by reinfusions; taking all the blood out of anything makes it a corpse. Post-modernity will be remembered as a real funeral procession that was taken for mock. Gogol himself couldn't have painted anything more ghoulish. Artists need to start talking, colloquially, about "all that twentieth century shit." Because it is a generalized trash sensibility, that runs through the Modern into the post-modern. Deconstruction does up that ante.

Even the advent of the automobile turned out to be trash. Look at the price we've paid for a hundred years of automotive activity— a corroded environment and a massive pile of bodies. Poor Bruce Springsteen— all those songs about cars. I've nearly died a few times in one myself, and the experience left me none the wiser. And the vast wasteland of television and movies and celebrity culture, and the idiots who want to make art out of it. It's true— for all that I occasionally get a sentimental hankering after nineties rock, the twentieth century, as a cultural edifice, barely stands. I think about that phrase from "Darkling Thrush," "the century's corpse outleant," and as I look at the twentieth century's corpse there is a real sense of pity, because the century didn't *have* to be the way it was. But the visual artists would've had to have listened so hard to Picasso, above the other stuff, and they just weren't up to the task. This last was a century of easy slides. Now, the challenge presents itself to rebuild. It can't be simple or easy, and some demarcations need to be put back in place. For me, there is little room for detours. This is because, to put the matter bluntly, I have a soul. When I say this, intellectual scruples ride bitch. The twentieth century encouraged intellectuals to jerk their parts off to the half-human. Scruples have been used as a cheap way of decimating realities. The life I've led has not encouraged me to respect intellectuals. The collusion of the post-modern and the intellectual is so spectacularly vapid that Britney Spears has more honesty consonance. And if you're going to jerk your parts off, at least do it to flesh. I've jerked it to Britney any number of times— has Baudrillard?

Yours,
Adam

John,

Kris really is a moody one. Dana is more bubbly, and even when she's in one of her rages she'll say hi and ask a few questions. When Kris gives me the sullen growl, I can tell she's being tested on many levels. For one, it's past noon— she's late. The DJ currently on shift very evidently does not appreciate this. The frayed edges she expresses in her movements makes clear that she's not getting laid; and those edges push away people like me, who would be willing to lay her. But because her social life (from what I've seen) is oriented around the Grind, and because she seems to have rules about how much she can interact with customers, the DJs are all she has. It's a vicious cycle, but she's too young to see all the traps she's caught in. She might not even realize she's trapped. I'm trapped, too, but I know what all the circumstances are that are holding me in place. One of which is a Peter Pan complex, so that I'm continually getting involved with girls younger and less experienced than I am. The other is being so abstracted away from the ways most people lead their daily lives that I might as well be an alien. When I occasionally watch television, I do so as though I'm enjoying a foreign dish— a bit crass, but intermittently pleasing. The average American watches three hours of television every day. Television— more twentieth century rubbish. One nice thing about the Grind is that I rarely hear people discussing television programs. The average Grinder has at least some high-minded thoughts. And some sexual hang-ups, which in 2010 are *de rigueur*. The fact is, every minute Kris isn't serving customers, she's playing on her i-phone. I-phones, to me, are another waste of time, and wonderful contraceptive devices. They might as well be called "cock blocks." So as Kris plays with her cock block, I notice how ineluctable the whole dissatisfaction vibe around sex is these days. Once you get over the whole American ethos of needing to be involved, it doesn't matter much. Get a few marriages under your belt, and the whole thing becomes so little compelling that all the sex on sale in the media seems not only like a hokey contrivance but a deliberate insult. Trish was a solid choice that way.

Not that I'm not enticed by representations of sex in the media— just that the crude reality of actual sex is at such a tangent to media representations that it's not difficult to pierce through the levels. Occasionally you see something that has some honesty consonance— people fumbling in their awkwardness, obvious neurosis. But the stumbles people make when they're actually naked are the most interesting thing; just because what nobody ever says is that sex is awkward; ecstatic (sometimes), but awkward. People reveal themselves in bed. Sleeping with Kris or Dana would be funny because I'd have to direct all the action. They don't know their bodies that well and in a sense I'd be manipulating their innocence. I get knocked down by my intelligence with these girls, and it's difficult, except with certain chemical aids, to establish commonalities. Ah, Kris— I can't but feel there are solid things I could give you if we go the distance. Wisdom is the compensation for awkwardness— human wisdom, gut-level wisdom, the knowledge of bodies. Kris's gut-level wisdom is that she can't, she can't— not just with me but with anyone. So I'm about to leave, waiting for a soulful body to crash alongside me and anchor.

Yours,
Adam

John,

Well, wouldn't you know—one of my old rivals from the street poet gang is sitting downstairs. This guy's as big as a house, mid-forties, dressed in rags, with his hair in a ponytail. These guys have not adjusted well to the depression—they never had solid jobs or health insurance to begin with. They've always lived on odds and ends. What appalls me (and there is something appalling about these guys) is how little honesty they have. These guys will be on their deathbeds, still claiming to be the biggest, best poets in Philly. This one happens to be gay; his queen ethos dictates that he's allowed to tell lies to promote himself. When I was new to the Philly poetry scene, we used to go out drinking. They immediately started in with the barbs (which often came back to me sideways), trying different angles to put me permanently in my place; was this kid a spoiled trust-funder, a namby-pamby academic, a spineless twerp? The problem with these street poets is that they have no eye or mind for complexity or nuance; in their mind, people are simple, because they have to be, because that's the only way to make sense of them. They found me difficult to pin down, but made the assumption that I'd eventually disappear. As I failed to disappear, they kept trying new angles, but nothing ever worked for them. So as this guy sits with his borrowed laptop, creating yet another blog (he has forty, none of which receive even a minimum of traffic), I'm gratified that the final angle turned out to be mine—these guys are all incompetent losers, without even the idea of class or distinction. Given this guy's compulsive eating habits, he doesn't have long to live, either.

Dana is in fine form today; for once, she's wearing something low-cut, and she gave me her “angles” when she served me my coffee. She even gave me a free cappuccino, which I appreciated. Now that she has Al Green playing on i-tunes, I'm almost ready to ask her out. The songs remind me of the first months I spent with Trish, when I was (unfortunately) cheating on Lisa. What about Al Green encourages transgression? In any case, I spilled my grits, and was never the same again. That was nine years ago, and now Trish is in New York, Lisa's married with kids in the 'burbs, and I'm a worldwide phenomenon. Now we've got Sam Cooke, and my sense is that Dana is rigging things so that we're smushed together. Actually, for some reason there are an inordinate number of gorgeous girls at the Grind today, and oh, the rages of Tantalus. It forces me to deal with a frustrated part of myself, that's awash in incomprehension. It's the chemistry of things—why certain parts of our lives work at some times and not others. Why so many human lives go down in flames is that chemistry is inscrutable, and if you never scrutinize what it is and how it works, you can have no continuing joy or success. What have I learned about this? Just that something that changes is built into everything. It sounds platitudinous, but people forget it all the time. These girls are all surrounded by guys. I have no angle of approach, so I'm right there with Freddie Mercury—another one bites the dust. And with a killer queen in the basement, I do my ga gas. But how I do this stuff, stay in these contexts, is how I keep myself alive. So the show must go on, and until the chemistry around me changes, I get to look and not touch.

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

A slow day at the Grind today, no music playing on i-tunes, and (as often happens during cold weather) I had to drag my ass out of the apartment to get here. I have been getting “the look” and a kind of buzz from the girls, though no solid prospects have emerged. But when the same faces start showing up on a daily basis, the ferment in the place is fun for me. Some strange things have entered my life, because the entire past year has been unprecedented for me. There is so little connecting me to my old life, when I reminisce it is with a deep sense of reach, extension, effort. The last girl to give me the look looks so much like Heather that I actually cringe— same wavy hair, tallness, handsomeness, brisk carriage. Heather herself is apparently back in Philly, living in the Italian Market like she used to, posting sardonic status updates about how she misses D.C. For me, D.C. is a miss—it’s always either too clean or too dirty. I’ve spent time in D.C. and in the D.C. suburbs and always been impressed with their deep anti-artsiness. Philly’s anti-art levels seem to me less drastic than D.C.’s; at least the world doesn’t look to us for politics. Alexandria is nice, but its’ genteel refinement is oriented around “acknowledged legislation,” rather than unacknowledged. The White House itself is such a ridiculous anti-climax (on every level these days) that I was stunned into silence the first time I saw it.

Philly is not only visionary deadness, it’s deep junk; there’s a depth consonance to its ugliness. You can make a chiasmus out of it, too; visionary junk and deep deadness works, too. The truth is, a fertile mind can make art anywhere. In my thoughts, I’ve developed some dedication to Philly, just for its ambience. The Grind has its junk-levels— these little curated shows (there’s a new one up now) are semi-farces, art by kids with no real track-record or future. There’s a split among the staff— about half (including Dana) play good music, the other half play trash, club stuff. Ten years ago, the Grind was all regulars; a core group of twenty or thirty souls who would spend a few hours a day here. Now, other than Kris, Dana, and the DJs, the cast keeps revolving, never settling on a set form. For me, there’s something about Philly that’s not settling, either— transitions are being imposed on artists here. Or, it could be my projection. What’s inside and what’s outside is a difficult dichotomy to work. In any case, I’m old enough to have attained some peace of mind about these things. Illusions are ineluctable if truth is relative. Even philosophy is difficult in some ways because it is not organically inside of us; we seek it out. And if the world is merely will and idea, it isn’t worth living in; but there are no pure subjects. Or maybe there are— the guy next to me is eating turkey and mashed potatoes out of Tupperware. Sometimes I get repulsed by people eating; this guy (though he’s thin and normal looking) repulses me. I’m not a big stickler for etiquette, but people generally don’t bring food to eat at the Grind. The girl next to me is copying I-Ching hexagrams into a notebook— she’s cute, Asian, in glasses, and completely uninterested. I think she’s connected to the DJs. This city is full of territorial pissings. That’s part of the deep junk. I love it.

Yours,
Adam

George,

They have a new exhibition of abstract paintings up at the Grind today. They're horrendous—bits of de Kooning, Pollock, Kandinsky, all painted with an oafish touch, no real feel for space, rhythm, or color. I believe, unfortunately, that Dana is acting as curator. I have, of course, the option of saying something to Dana about this, but I won't. There is also a flier up for one of the DJs gigs that blatantly imitates some of my poems. Unusually, it's mostly text. On days like this, hanging around a bunch of pseudo-artists is rather annoying; even if the perk is that Kris is finally acknowledging my existence. Kris doesn't seem to have any artistic pretensions—her whole trip is just food and sex. There's an ambience around her that's almost French, a sense of delicacy and refinement, but bereft of a distinct aesthetic. Which brings up an interesting point— who does an artist need to spend time with? Different artists have different answers— some hardliners will only associate with other artists (the arts do breed packrats), some go out of their way to isolate themselves from other artists. I've done both, and for me different tactics have worked at different times. Right now, sustained isolation is doing wonders for my ability to produce. Doing little dishes with Dana, Kris, and the DJs doesn't count for me— the days I would travel great distances to spend weeks or months with other artists are temporarily over. I've gone through heaven and hell with groups of artists, but at the end of the day I am “for myself,” not for a group, and packrat mentalities are right there in the minor artist handbook. The larger the group, the smaller the collective mentality— only smallness can restore focus to groups. There are few advantages in art to having a compact mind— real discipline expands rather than contracts.

On the other hand, groups (and minor artists) can have a kind of scummy allure, and breed an ambience of intense and festive decadence, out of gossip, sex, alcohol, art, and late nights. I've always dipped in and out of this, and scum-life, especially in Philly, resembles deep-sea diving. Kerouac said “the pearl is there, the pearl is there,” and he was right. Philly nightlife is particularly vicious, and if the scum is sherbert, it's because you want so badly to lose yourself completely. I don't believe that the best of life is but intoxication, but I do believe most of us are happiest when we've lost ourselves. I can't remember the last time I authoritatively lost myself— I get glimpses and flashes of sweet obliteration, but the full loss, what might be called the *dead loss* (and this brings us up to Baudelaire) hasn't happened in a while. Incidentally, here comes Kris with a wash-cloth, and her food/sex chiasmus carries its own darkling hints. The Grind is full of little deaths, and when Dana walks in, everybody dies. Maybe it's because her tan woolen cap frames her face in such a way that she looks like a cherub. But she storms in and flaps around with her little concerns, issues that seem crucial to her. One of which is to set loose currents of activities among all the employees. Kris and the DJs are sent spinning by her manic energy. Then (I thought she was working) she spins right out again. The two women next to me also have some kind of artistic angle. They're showing off for me. I pick my nose in response. Wouldn't you do the same?

Yours,
Adam

George,

The guy sitting next to me has a bunch of poetry books (not mine) stacked on his table, and he's typing away on his laptop. The vibe is not nice—there's a spitefulness to his set jaw and furrowed brow that is very noticeable. As usual at the Grind, I'll wait for him to push things towards a confrontation. The couple sitting across from me are expecting, and eating croissants. I'm about to turn thirty-five, and still childless. It is, I have admitted, an Ultimate Adulthood issue—whether the childless stay children. I know that the work and responsibility involved in having children cannot be lightly undertaken, and usually is. But, the way the human game works, shit happens. In certain moods, the impinging winter turns all these thoughts creepish. Pine Street looks Poe-like, and even the tumbling leaves seem invested with a strange life. To double back, I've spotted how having kids will solve all my problems, and don't always register how it will create new ones. This couple has a stable bourgeois look; the kind of folks that keep their thoughts confined to narrow channels. The woman, especially, has the spoiled look of a television-fed fiend. I am repulsed back by her droning tones. That non-expressiveness in her folded arms—the product of entropy that doesn't know itself—but, in the broad scope of things, I don't know myself much better than she does, because there are an infinite number of things to set in relation to each of us that allow knowledge, and we can only know a few. She is storing a life that may or may not be worthless. Who knows?

One thing I know, just for myself, is that the permanent flux of human flesh is not built to deliver anyone sustained satisfaction. When I think about what a mess Trish has made of her life, what was gained in all the moments of total unity we shared? I'm strong and stable enough to keep an account at the Proust Bank of sensations and memories; Trish isn't. I also feel, very strongly at times, what would've happened had I not fulfilled myself as an artist. I'd be a shambling holocaust of a person; right there with Trish. But I got lucky and won the lottery, and here I am. And it remains a permanent question, whether we need to think about what might've been, when it's tragic. This all happens because Philly winters are short on frissons, so that just being outside is a pain in the ass. The days themselves seem to *brood*. It's gotten to the point at which about half the customers at the Grind have laptops. The whole technology angle in 2010 is out of control, and I have consciously decided not to participate. I come here to escape from the Net, not to continue my Net life. And to take the ball I made with Trish and Tob and begin to run with it.

Sometimes, when Dana works, this place does work as an escape valve. The combination of her blonde freshness and the classic music she plays sets me in a pleasant space, even if the freshness is only surface level. Surface/depth issues arise around me all the time, and I never know how to react. That's a real level of autonomy individual humans have—to choose to perceive people, places, and situations in profound or shallow ways. Most people take “depth opportunities” and toss them. I'd like to hope that I've pursued my life as a depth junkie, in line with my Scorpio ascendant, which right now is looking around for refreshment.

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

There's an urban planning squad sitting next to me. They're developing plans for some kind of recreation center in West Philly. When I think of West Philly, I think of Trish—the long nights we spent together. We were stoned more than half the time. Because we spent so much time being intoxicated, the levels of intimacy we developed weren't particularly durable. I used to take every opportunity to get stoned, because I had sharp hunger pangs for escape and release. My life on the street in Philly was choking me to death. Now, the stranglehold is loosened—I'm not compelled to do the dishes I don't want to anymore. But if we were both handfuls, Trish was more extreme than I was. I was never bottomless or fathomless. There are stains on those memories that can't be effaced—not only because we're separated, but because Trish and I have no intimacy levels left, even in thought. To me, Clark Park means Trish—to these guys, it's a project. The lounge music the DJs are playing makes an absurd juxtaposition with the stillness of the winter sunlight.

I'm waiting to call a woman I've known for ten years (not Trish.) This relationship has remained unconsummated—she's a trust-fund heiress, a few years older than me, attractive, mutable, and quite useless. Another woman called me up at four in the morning looking to be picked up from a hospital. I couldn't make sense of what she was saying. And then I couldn't fall back to sleep. So I cleaned the apartment and spent a few hours grading papers. Now, I stretch my limbs and try to relax. On the verge of turning thirty-five, I'm seriously not a young man anymore. Or, maybe I am. Living a life in the arts confers a good number of strange temporal dimensions—one of which is that all poets are considered young until they hit forty. I spend enough time using my brain to feel timeless and ageless. Nothing ages the human spirit faster than ignorance. This heiress has always lived an exquisitely thoughtless life—this is her burden. Everything I've done with her is desultory, and will remain so. I have (as usual) no excuses. Little bits of Prufrock have entered my soul; the essential issue is filling space and time. This, it seems to me, is what we were given free will for, as emptiness impinges on everyone, draining away our spirit's traces. The compensation of the mature mind just seems to be acceptance; also, the knowledge that if you want to be understood, you have to make yourself plain. The urban planning squad is just going (in the context of their conversation) through the motions. They need to appear familiar to each other without seeming intimate. It's a strange dance. Our lives are full of those we sort-of know, and there are many coldnesses behind our easy assumptions.

Among the strange things that come and go with us is the sense of coherence. There is no intrinsic reason that things should cohere or not cohere. Coherence and incoherence are equally strange. The modulations of the human voice, changes in the human face, have repulsive and enticing dimensions, and have losses built into them. To bring it home, the urban planners are repulsive to me because they seem to have no high ideals and are looking to fill out their resumes. The only high ideal I have is the big impossible one: truth. God is small in comparison. Knowing the heiress puts a chiasmus into place, and I know what I've inherited—just an approach to something, an inkling.

Yours,
Adam

Percy,

Frosty winter morning— the Grind is settling in with a new crew of people. It's a pretty reserved bunch, all on laptops, who maintain huddled postures. Combined with the bland techno music the DJs have on, the place becomes a microcosmic representation of America. One stray couple, who give off the air of feted celebrities (though I've never seen them before), are sitting eating bagels with their coats on; I keep waiting for a new narrative to coalesce (Kris) to replace the old one (Dana).

The penny papers this morning had one of my street poet rivals in it— a plug for a book being sold at a gay bookstore. I wouldn't mind being made a commodity fetish this way, but I'm a Penn grad so they can't touch me. When I took these penny papers seriously, ten years ago, I had the intuitive sense (which I resisted) that something about me would always be repulsive to them. Now, I know what it is— intelligence. When you're shooting for the lowest common denominator in a city like Philly, everything (as has been said) needs to stink perfectly to be included. The way Center City looks on a morning like this redeems everything for me. The harmonies between different facades and shapes on Pine Street hit me at such an angle that it almost replaces music. Why colors work with other colors, how seeing *this* before seeing *this* affects both visions, all these painterly eye things have become companions to me. That's a mystery— seeing— that never gets resolved for anyone. In certain moods, there is so much enjoyment just in seeing that you wonder how anyone could be miserable or depressed. But exalted perceptions come and go, and living a quotidian life involves us in currents that cause enough sudden (sometimes subtle) shifts that "golden eye" moods come and go. If you can open enough spaces to allow them to recur, golden eye perceptions can take root and blossom. They can turn a city like Philly, fallaciously famed for its ugliness, into an artist's paradise.

In bleak December, the sunset is built right into the morning, and gives light a graceful fragility. Because this intersection (13th and Pine) has no skyscrapers within viewing distance, it has an almost suburban look. Pine Street in general is a respite from the brutishness of Center City. The brutishness of Market, Chestnut, and Walnut have their own allure. Walnut has some elegant blocks amidst the brutishness, while Market and Chestnut are pure sleaze. When I think of other American cities (Cleveland, Memphis, Phoenix), I wonder how their centers measure up. The big three cities are already too vaunted, too praised. I think a perception has taken root in the arts that New York, especially, has had its day. When robbed of the luster of continuing glory, New York instantly becomes pretty desolate. Chicago I like better, and this neighborhood in particular (Pine Street) forms a nice analogue to Wicker Park. Los Angeles will always be big for the entertainment industry, but higher art consonance is a bigger stretch. The big cliché about cars lends some unattractiveness to the L.A. aura. Philly is Philly, and I'm pleased to have made something worthwhile out of it, even if the inhabitants resent that I've done so. But even that resentment has charming levels of visionary deadness which redeems me and this into a state of partial grace.

Yours,
Adam

George,

Sometimes this place makes me hungry. It's a spiritual hunger for some feeling, sensation, impulse that I've never had before. I'm old enough so that it doesn't have to be sexual— it could just be a conversation or even an argument— the wonders, in short, of people, not architecture— the architecture of souls or anti-souls. The guy in the Boston Bruins jacket that just walked in is someone I've thought about talking to. We have a woman in common— the shrewish daughter of a poetess, who I hooked up with in a stairwell six years ago. She had pierced nipples which, in my perversity, I sucked on. This guy is one of those peripheral arts-related types who you see at openings and readings, but he has nice manners and I've been close enough at times to hear him talk in an unpretentious way. Today, he's got a girl with him, so it's a no-go. She looks rather similar to the one we have in common— red hair tied in a ponytail, freckles, piercings.

In other news, for some reason the DJs seem to be going through a New Romantic phase. Can I make a chiasmus between Shelley and Spandau Ballet? Both were clearly interested in truth, and love. It's a funny thing that was always precocious in me— the feeling for *zeitgeists*. I was aware of the New Romantics (and Molly Ringwald and John Hughes) as a little kid, before I even established aesthetic standards for myself. This music sounds so rinky-dink, in 2010, that I'm tempted to turn on my I-pod. These DJs have a taste for kitsch, so I suppose we're supposed to be listening with an ear for ironic subtext. But when we land like shot pigeons on *Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark*, I grow weary of irony and wish they'd just throw on the *Velvets* like they do when Dana's here. This whole place has more kitsch consonance than I've been letting on— the fruitiness of the lamps that hang on the tables, tacky ads plastered to the door, clunky chairs that look to have been taken from attics or old classrooms. But the Grind is fortuitously placed on a nice, respectable looking block, albeit one placed 100 yards from a ghetto. The warm vibe here is born of the kitsch being *serious* kitsch— functional, comforting, creating a distinctive ambience. Now, I'm waiting for more jarring elements to turn it prickly again, as periodically happens.

Ten years ago, you could still smoke here. Smoke indoors does create an ambience of decadence that's been lost. The Grind in general has become more upscale, middle class. The clientele used to be mostly street artists and U of Arts kids— now, it's more heterogeneous; levels of artsiness rebut middle-class overtones and vice versa. It's a conflict that forms part of my own consciousness, so it's easy for me to blend into the scenery. I'm more anonymous here than I used to be— the Grind is scattered these days, diffuse. It's lost a certain amount of intensity and focus, while growing in variety and material prosperity. It makes sense that the DJs have now moved on to *ELO*, because at times the façade of this place seems bland. But it's a mutable façade, and when Dana works, the music she plays turns this place into a rock paradise. I have my own mutable façade, and I feel it's curious to wonder how far we can step outside ourselves to view our own architecture.

Yours,
Adam

John,

Dana's in a low-key mood, and she's playing fifties doo-wop rubbish. She just invited me, also, to one of her puppet shows. She's talking to two of her friends about (you guessed it) herself. From a distance, I find her narcissism cute. But I've never spent more than a few hours at a time with her, and over long periods of time narcissists are horrendous bores. The interesting thing about Dana is that she's not really a user—most narcissists need people around them to reinforce their perceptions, and will use people to that end. Dana reinforces her perceptions to herself, and holds them in. Her narcissism is only noticeable to the extent that she's capable only of discussing herself. I'm not enticed by the idea of her puppet show, because she wants her entire life to be a puppet show.

I've realized that everyone at the Drop is more innocent than me on every level. The experience I gain from coming here is of two or three different forms of naïve innocence—

the innocent pretensions of young artists, the unthinking presumptuousness of music business types, and the desperate attention seeking of hangers-on. Middle-class types are getting mixed in randomly left and right these days, but the manifest essence of the Grind is this. Other kinds of manifest essences do present themselves with the new crowds— but middle-class innocence is spiritual, rather than material. And it isn't necessarily positive innocence— it's the imported innocence of lives spent watching television. The middle-class dream, of perfect material consonance, rips human souls to shreds in its titanic strength. It even applies to thoughts— material thoughts are those in line with everybody else's, maintained and enforced by the media, over-souls of such things. I've been shocked by how many intellectuals go out of their way to keep these levels of consonance at their disposal. It gives their mind some grain, as Barthes would say. But the idea of breaking in and honing soul parts is anathematized, because the twentieth century trashed them in a generalized way. The twentieth century, spiritually, was garbage for the human race. The twenty-first presents a new challenge— of rebuilding human souls from ashes, feces, and dirt. Think globally, act locally works for spiritual life, too.

What everything always falls down around is what people do on a day-to-day basis. The spiritual discipline necessary not to watch television every day is what we, particularly Americans, need. My own prediction is that the twenty-first century will go two ways— some will rebel, and ascend; others will fall to unprecedented depths. I'm doing my own little bit to bring the human race up— my sword has been drawn against the vapid fraudulence of post-modern art. By blurring the line between cheap, crass comedy and high art, post-modernism accomplished the neat task of draining the vitality from what was a near-corpse to begin with. That's the essential twentieth century image— a corpse. If I could get Dana to think thoughts like this, I'd be happier. She doesn't realize that she is, herself, a puppet, or who the strings belong to, or why she needs to dance the way she does. It's not like my strings can't be pulled, either, but at least I keep track of what the forces coalescing around me are. And I don't indulge in doo-wop rubbish.

Yours,
Adam

George,

Every so often, I think it goes up to go someplace other than the Grind. Here I am at Damage, on 4th Street off of South. When I first moved to Center City from New York, Damage was the first place I latched onto. You could smoke in the back room (I liked cloves then) and pass around guitars—I was writing my first (and thankfully only) rock opera. This is where I picked up Jean, on a snowy February night in 2000. The Free School social nexus also originated at Damage. Now, the place has become half-gentrified. They have Serge Gainsbourg playing on their I-tunes, large multi-media installations on the walls, but the too-pristine tables and floors bespeak a subsumed bourgeois consonance. This is only happening because Dana is waiting unduly long to open the Grind today. When I walked by, I guessed she was jerking off in the basement. It's the day after Christmas, a dreary Sunday morning, and I've never seen Center City so desolate. But the track lighting and white ceilings give Damage an edge on the Grind, which on winter mornings like this might as well hold funerals. And since the Geek Squad flaked out today, it's two more days without a computer. Someday soon people will be able to take care of computer viruses for themselves. For now, my days of hard browsing are over. I still insist that the Internet is the new Wild West.

Something to face about Dana: the comparisons to Jena Strayner are difficult ones. Jena managed to open herself up, as completely as possible, to the ways of the flesh. Not to say that she didn't become advanced, very fast, and fluent, in the emotional vagaries of serious relationships as well. Her family and native community rebelled, but she stuck to her guns. Because she used whatever crowbar was at hand to make a place in her consciousness for something both genuine and tactile, there can never be an edge for me of making fun of her, of being derisive. She was able to mean it as much as anyone ever meant it in relation to me, including Trish. Dana has latent in her all these things, but they are subsumed beneath a cartoonish surface. It's now taken for granted that I'm severing whatever tie is there. The game is over of waiting around for her to get real. So, I consider Jena more fulsome in her rejection of what, in the country, amounts to eternal cartoonish-ness, permanent posturing; the sense that the individual human being is always a caricature of one type or another. Dana would never guess what that world is, beneath the cartoonish one she inhabits— how rich, how rewarding. I attempted to offer her a package deal which meant that she could completely transcend her past— she was unable to accept it, because the raw courage to do so wasn't there. I look back at Jena Strayner after fifteen years, and marvel at what courage it must've taken to devote herself to me, for the duration of our brief marriage. It was a story of real human triumph. I am in no rush to call Dana Blasconi a tragedy, except to say that what was offered to her, from me, may or may not show up for her in germane form again.

Damage has installation art, as I mentioned, lining the walls. The poems on these installations are ridiculous. They look like the scrawling of a febrile sixteen-year-old. The other paintings are Neo-Geo recreations, the seeming work of MFA students in search of a voice.

My problem, as an MFA student, was that I already had a voice, but it wasn't stable or secure. My good poems outclassed all the instructors, but I was still prone to doing wild experiments that worked only intermittently. Wendy was in a similar position, but she would get too timid, rather than indulging in wild experimentation. That's how things settled for her, too— she leads a timid artistic life. I've learned that Wendy's syndrome— brilliant talent not met by striking courage— happens all the time. Her great passion is for negative self-effacement. The MFA student who did these paintings and placed them at Damage is possibly friends with the staff— young girls with the air of the half-cultured. They certainly seem more culturally aware than Dana and Kris. The one with hoop earrings and beret actually seems rather friendly, too. She interacts with customers, talking about the latest Coen Brothers movie. I would've hit on her, openly and instantly, ten years ago. In fact, Damage is a place where I used to make an ass of myself on a regular basis. Now, the books and degrees have leant me a dignity that will not permit so many loose shenanigans. The strange thing is that I still fantasize about easy sex and drugs. These things are on offer in Philly— sometimes. But Philly resents achievements and achievers. The Philly ethos is passive aggressive, where the arts are concerned. In a certain sense, Center City can only be an orgy for underlings. Philly ethos grinds down my will to relate. And if it's all Universal in the end, I wouldn't be surprised.

Universally,

Adam

George,

Back at Damage, I've noticed that the girls here are nicer than Kris and Dana. Or, they seem to be, on the surface. I'm learning, as I get older, to gauge how much spirit there is behind what people say. Many chatterboxes are permeated by the most searing, vapid emptiness. The Damage girls do chatter, but my tentative hypothesis is that the spirit behind their banal pleasantries is more generous than what's at the Grind. Context may or may not be a problem; I haven't penetrated deeply enough into this place to know if it's as rigidly structured as the Grind is. The vista Damage looks out on is, like the Grind, almost suburban; a tree-lined block, set off enough from South Street so that its' stinky sleaze can't infiltrate the place. South Street was a fantasyland for me during my adolescence— it embodied rock culture, the urban, access to excitement and art. South Street in 2011 is so overrun with chain stores and other corporate entities that all rock hipness has been drained away. Fin de siècle South Street was still in transition— I was on the case all the time, because the venues (for poetry and music) were still operative. No one knew then that the transformation would be so complete. Damage is sequestered enough to be safe. One problem, however, is the clientele— it seems mostly to be old middle-class guys. In other words, this isn't Bohemia, created by students and artists. These salty types like to bullshit with the girls, who humor their quips. There are, in fact, some gentrified types in South Philly— condos and apartment complexes amid the row homes. It's funny how they mix scum and polish in their speech. But once you cross Walnut into Olde City, the scum disappears and its straightforward yuppie. I've realized that just to get to the absolute heart of one major American city could take a lifetime. Reality, as a generalized thing, is difficult to know.

This is where I stand now, this is where I've ended up— ready to humbly bow before mysteries, like John and Diana, like N. Rejecting closure. The mystery of Trish and I will always be how we did it— opened up that fully to each other, embraced each other completely. Like other obsessive brains, I often pretend I know, but I don't. Somehow something in us reciprocally forced us to love each other, to give each other everything. Tobi was always a mystery and, even more than Trish, the mysteries are hewn right into her paintings— how she saw what she saw, translated, from other worlds, what she translated. The forever part of the two painters means that the shroud of mystery will always impinge on whatever people, including myself, say about them. Ineffability. John and I commandeering the Highwire, Heather Mullen, even the strangely archetypal glimmer of Dana Blasconi herself— all of it impinged on by the mysteries of reality, of tactility. Here it is— what happened. Here's what I saw, here's what I missed. And that generalizations don't cut it. You were either there, or you weren't. Like your own words, George. *The best of life is but intoxication*. There is nothing underling about what the last decade delivered me. I may just have to spend the rest of my life putting the pieces together of this, of the sacrosanct, of the mysterious.

On a morning like this, crisp and warmer than average, I don't see anything underling about Center City Philly; even if a neighborhood hasn't emerged to replace South Street as the nexus of hip culture. Damage falls down this way, too— it doesn't have impeccable hipster credentials. Unless a troupe of artists emigrates here, Philly will never have a Le Chat Noir—the Free School was the closest I've come to creating one. What I angle against acknowledging in these letters is that the attitude most Philadelphians have about Philly is still gauche. I haven't been able to change much. Philadelphians hate genius and ignorance equally— they're impossible. When a national recession ploughs through the area, that wall of implacable negativity coalesces into something visionary to witness. It may be perverse to view this as a positive development, but to an artist anything interestingly multi-leveled is positive. It can even be enticing. These two Damage girls are like pistons in an engine— when one comes up, the other goes down. They don't like each other too much, and they're competing for tips. I wonder how many times I'll have to come back to make some kind of incision, and if it matters.

Does any of it matter? Did Dana matter? Well, yes, I'm quick to remind myself. It has to. The connections we form to each other, if the human world is not to seem completely pitiful, are the most vital thing about us, even beyond philosophical curlicues and arabesques, however brilliant, even more than momentarily so. Does that make me a Romantic right alongside you, Byron, or just a headstrong devotee of the million-night approach to boys and girls? Y'know what, George? I think I can hear you answering me, from somewhere near the coast of Italy, a little tipsy, as usual. All these letters have finally drawn an acknowledgement, a legitimate response. The vision is: Byron misses Caroline Lamb and makes a bee-line for the town wall-flower. He woos her tenderly with a few words and they walk through the woods to a sandy beach. There are sandy beaches along the Italian coast, right? There better be. No more second-guessing the master. No matter what happens here, no matter what becomes of Dana, or Damage, or Trish and the rest, when you believe, you believe. Right? Right.

Yours in deep conviction,

Adam

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Funtime Press, Philadelphia, 2024

